

Eric Walz History 300 Collection

Donald Morris – Life During the Korean War

By Donald Morris

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SG: This is an interview with Donald Gene Morris of Mesa, Arizona. I will be interviewing him about the Korean War. Where and when were you born?

DM: Born in Michigan, Marion County in 1928.

SG: And where did you serve?

DM: Served in the army in Korea, trained in California then went to Korea.

SG: What was your rank and your various assignments?

DM: I was a Corporal when I came out, and I was a mechanic, I worked on the trucks kept the ammo trucks rolling, serviced them, greased the wheel bearings, tuned up the engines, etc. things like that.

SG: Did you work on cars before you went into the service or did you learn how to do that then and then you worked on them after?

DM: Yes I did I came out of high school as a... went into a garage as a mechanic right up till a year or so ohh it got pretty darn greasy, I didn't like it so I went to a factory for a while worked there and here and there, and then finally got into a car dealer parts department and worked my way up to the management, manager of another dealer and spent many years managing parts department.

SH: Cool, when you were in the service did you meet and make new friends while you were in Korea?

DM: Well you make new friends, about that time after you come out of the service you seem to go every which way and I've been trying to find some on the ... email, the web been able to bump into some of them but exactly in my unit I haven't found anyone I know as yet, but I'm working on it.

SG: While you were in Korea did you run into any people you knew from home?

DM: Anybody that what?

SG: Anybody that you knew from home, like any from Michigan or someone you knew from the s...?

DM: Oh yes quite a few of us from Michigan there Joe Graffo from Niles was there he was in well the same battalion but I didn't get to see very much of him. And... Another fellow from Berrian Springs, in the Halftrack a 150 caliber [watt 50s in] the halftrack, another one from St. Joe although I didn't know him before us... Niles... Berrian... that's about all I guess though there was another one from Niles went clear as Britain... I lost track of him I don't know what happened to him.

SG: How did the training you received before you went over there how did that prepare you for like over in... Korea...?

DM: Well, Train, we train as a division all the training was excellent we had many hours of pool. I was fortunate [to be] around the trucks all the time, changing tires at first or switching flats and then I was on the other higher echelon they call it it's a little heavier service [mode of] work as a battalion motor pool.

SG: Cool did you have weapons training too?

DM: Pardon?

S: Did you have weapons training too?

DM: oh, Definitely that's in the basic training we went through we learned to [shoot] a gun and of course handle it. I became what you call (or) consider an expert I hit 200 yards with a [carbean] I got 7 out of 8 shots twice so I qualified for an expert, I'm kinda proud of that.

SG: That's awesome.

DM: So yeah we shot a lot of things, pistols, and then burp guns, they call it is an automatic gun. There were several other things that uh we learned how to throw a grenade, pull the pin and throw it all sorts of things and had some uh... I wanna say dynaamite not dynamite explosive training with TNT quite interesting that TNT... lots of TNT you have a hard time setting it that off, you could shoot a rifle or a bullet though it would go off,

DG: WOW!

DM: But you put a, take a block oh I think about they area about 3 inches square and about 3 inches long I think then they cut them in half and then they've got a hole in the end of them and you put a cap in there and a short fuse of about 6 inches and get into that and throw it will explode, the only time it will explode is with that cap it will not... You can stomp on it throw it do anything with TNT and it won't unless it has a high explosive cap.

SG: Interesting. I didn't know that.

DM: The cap is probably as strong as a large firecracker.

SG: Okay. Was there anything that you wish they would have told you before you went over there that they didn't tell you that you had to learn through experience?

DM: oh wow... Let's see, well I don't know of anything pretty much everything was covered; just carry your rifle with you at all times no matter where you're at you've got

that right next to you. Umm Learn anything... You learned how to keep yourself clean, boy it gets mighty dirty out there in the field. Don't have easy showers, and bathrooms and things,...

SG: So uh, what did you do to keep yourself clean? Like did you wash your clothes er?

DM: we went a long time before we got any clothes washed or face washed or anything... once, then we finally moved and uh well they took us down to the, what they called the quartermaster, that the back truckload of a... back to the rear and they have showers set up you know, little portable things. And we got to take showers then, but later on we moved forward and we moved along side of a fairly large creek, and the stream was running pretty good, so we dammed it up and make a pretty nice place to take a bath. And we set up a barrel of heated water off of the bank and we washed pretty good there.

SG: That must have felt real good.

DM: Oh, yes.

SG: I bet you never took showering for granted again.

DM: Yep, it's something you miss because eventually you get pretty scrounge. And then you get some real ingenuity guys and they figured out how to take a shower when we moved again in another little stream, it was kind of a small one. So we got water and filled a big barrel, it was an old gas barrel and cut it open and filled it full of water in what they call an "ammo case," a little metal case underneath, and they put some fuel oil in it and fired it up and heated the water in that barrel and created a spout that stuck out and put a little make-shift shower head on it and valves, and we had a pretty good shower by-gosh.

SG: That's pretty ingenious.

DM: Yep, yep, we had to build... outfit. Anyways, we were sitting there and not moving there at all at that time about during the later part of the mid, mid '52, toward the end there, we weren't moving, we were talking, the talks were beginning to progress and they were staying put, they weren't moving and things like that, so it was our chance to [make the things like that].

SG: Alright, according to your understanding, what were America's goals in the War, over in Korea?

DM: Well, to stop the aggression and to free the South from the imposition of the North. And General Macarthur at that time wanted to keep on pushing right on up, wanted to take over the North, but they, President Truman decided he didn't want to get up there close to the China and them involved, which would be a little tough then, so he decided to stay in the DMZ that remains today. But then Carson was fired by Truman and the

South finally came to a conclusion with the North and talked and that's the way it is today.

SG: Cool. Did you volunteer to go over there, or were you rafted?

DM: It wasn't voluntary, no it was "drafty," it was enlisted men alright, they call it enlisted men, but it wasn't voluntary, you know drafty.

SG: You were told to enlist, that's what you were trying to say, so there you go.

DM: Right, the selective service. They select you and you go.

SG: How did you feel about that, the whole drafting process?

DM: Well, I was kind of prepared for it during World War II, I had my physicals and everything and waiting for the call to go, had I had been a year older like the friend that I grew up with, who was a year older, he went into the service and was in there a year and never went anywhere and went over. While I sat there waiting and waiting and didn't get called of course and it was over.

SG: So, how old were you then when World War II ended?

DM: I was 18.

SG: You were 18, ok.

DM: But you had to sign up (can't discern)... plus at 19, then the war was over. It was 5 years later in 1950.

SG: Ok. What do you think about the differences in the opinion toward World War II and the Korean War, or what was it, the Conflict, am I supposed to say Conflict?

DM: Well, it wasn't just a conflict, it was a war.

SG: Ok.

DM: Well, I'll tell ya, a lot of fella's out there they called in the Korean Conflict, but it was the makings of a War going on there, I'll tell ya, there was a mountain out there that they called, "Old baldy," they had blown the tree's and vegetation off of it so much that it was just powder on top. So they'd take it and then loose it again, boy they just about rode to the hills.

SG: When you were back there a couple years ago, did you see evidence of battles fought there? When you went back to Korea?

DM: Well, no by that time things had pretty well grown back over, there wasn't anything to do with devastation there. You know it had been from '52 to '94, that's quite a few years. That's 40 years I think, it was in the anniversary, it's pretty well grown out and everything. Up by the DMZ and what not, the militarized zone is pretty military, there's a lot of buildings up in there, it's really grown up quite a bit, it just sits there and is patrolled, the patrol that quarter all the time, and no, as far as that go, it didn't, the ended up moving "inmujan" which is where the books were, and even it makes you go across the border by going in this building that sits on the crossing line, and you go up in, and of course they lock the door that's in the other end, and we walked around the Navel which is of course in the other end of the building, which is actually in North Korea. Bit as far as any evidence of battles, no, it's pretty much grown up by now.

SG: Ok, back to my question which we got a little distracted from. What was the difference that you saw in the attitude toward World War II and into the Korean War and then even into Vietnam. Did you see, was it, In normal America as opposed to just different politicians could you see the difference between the attitude of attitudes of everyone around you in regard to those different wars?

DM: Attitudes of who?

SG: Attitudes of the American people.

DM: American People?

SG: Yes, toward the war, how they felt about it, if they were for it.

DM: The Korean war, I think they, they think it was necessary because they stopped the progression which is what we fought the world war 2 for, and it was about the same thing, more or less, it stopped Germany from taking over the all the other countries... Korea was like that too, the North Koreans came down and tried to take over, and we drove them back. The attitudes of the Vietnam was a different story. I think the public was not in favor of it because they were not accomplishing anything. And they didn't know, you see, in a war, they have what is called a "main line of resistance," that line, the enemies on one side and we're on the other. Vietnam a guy could be walking right beside you with a hand grenade, could toss it at you and run. You didn't know where they were at, they were just jungle, and they just came out of nowhere. And it was a totally different world. It was fruitless.

SG: Did you see any drug use among the soldiers you were serving with?

DM: No, there wasn't. If there was drugs, it wouldn't last long and they won't have any way of getting it. Because, especially in Korea, it wasn't a big developed area, there were no towns or cities or people... we didn't see Koreans. There were other armies off in another part of the line, cities were behind us, and we were up in the mountains and there were just no villages, course we were evacuated, there was nothing like that.

SG So there was not going out and drinking and things like that?

DM: Well there was what was called “beer ration” every once a month they would ship in some beer, but it was pretty weak beer, you know they called it, “b2 beer,” you know, you could drink a gallon and it wouldn’t do much, so.

SG: You could drink a whole gallon and not get drunk?

DM: Well, I didn’t drink that much of course, I said you could.

SG: Oh, ok.

DM: You could get three or four cans is all and that was it. No, that stuff wasn’t uh, no it might have been addictive, but it wasn’t nearly strong enough, it was almost like a, oh what would you call it, “deer beer” or something of that order.

SG: You said you didn’t really spend a lot of time with the other Koreans you were fighting with, so you didn’t have much of a...

DM: No, we fought in a division with our own men, the Korean armies were in a different area. They were down the line in “Bedinso” you see, “Bedinso” was many many miles wide. We were on the eastern direction mobile to 38 and parallel, and there were no Koreans to speak of at all, and sometimes we’d go through, once in a great while, but never around us. Down the road maybe, but very seldom that we would ever see the Korean army, maybe. We just stayed in our own area.

SG: Were there any civilians in the area where you guys were?

DM: No.

SG: No, none?

DM: No they were all evacuated moved back to zone.

SG: Well, that was good.

DM: No, that would be too dangerous for them.

SG: Did you feel that the military was engaging in the best possible strategy to bring the war to an end? Did you think you guys...

DM: Well I have mix feelings. I some ways I feel that ways, Macarthur would have let him go, and let him go up and take over North Korea, and in the other hand, I can see president Truman’s side of it, let’s not get involved there where the Chinese might come across the border and they got a tremendous army. Let’s not get involved with them, so they decided to oh, ok, well, what happened was that the division that I was in moved in

to Korea, and technically, there was another division the 24, that was in the upper island of Japan, and we all came in there at the same time, and boy those people thought they were doubling up those divisions and they were going to go right up to the border. And, which we weren't intended to, but we went in there and took over the same positions that they held over there, bunked in their bunkers, and they moved their equipment out, and we moved our equipment in. And we sat along side of each other for a while until they moved out, very shortly, they moved out and got back on the ship and went to Japan. They had been beat pretty bad and they needed the rest. See, we were fresh troops so we moved in there and we stayed and that's when they really started talking. The North Koreans thought for sure that they were going to make a big push with all these divisions they were doubling up on, and that's when they really started talking seriously. We were still battling of course, I mean, even after the, a month or so after I left Korea they had one more battle on that one hill, they heard that we were moving out and they thought that we were short handed and, they got fooled.

SG: So how long did you end up being actually over in Korea?

DM: In South Korea, just a little over a year. And to, well in October I went to California trained from January through to about March/April, in basic training went to San Francisco, put us on the boat with all our equipment, let us get on, pack everything, it was quite a job. (Put things on salt) then we had to wash it off after we got to Japan. And we got the equipment on over there with us. And for most of the middle of '51 until about August 51' then we had time to make a mock landing, that's the other thing, when they heard we were going to make a landing, it wasn't in Korea, it was in Japan, that's why it was a mock landing, they call it maneuvers. Shortly after that, came Thanksgiving, we packed up and moved out to LST's again and North Korea and landed in "minshawn" and moved up to make convoys up the Han river, all the way over to the other side of the island, ah, I mean the peninsula, and up the North across the 25th parallel, and that's where we found the 24th and took over their positions.

S: What was it like when you came home? Did everything different. What was it like to be a veteran of a war?

DM: What was it like?

SG: Yeah.

DM: I was glad I got home. No big fan fare. They don't do it like they do now, boy, wave the flag and a big "harrah" for ... no there wasn't any of that fan fare stuff.

SG: So you just went back to life as normal?

DM: I got released at Camp Carson in Colorado, my parents came out and picked me up there when I was released, and was turned out, and we came home and they had a vacation. Oh, and eventually we went back to work because the company I was working for needed me and I needed to keep a job. I needed a job, so that's what I did, went back

to work. I worked my way up to a caller man, then quit there and got a job bearing springs for the next several years. Something nice about years ago, when I was coming back on the airplane on TWA, they saw that I was military and asked me, "Hey do you want to come up in the cabin and talk to the pilot?" I said, oh yea. It was what they call a TWA Constellation, it has four engines and three tails. Anyways, they don't do that any more. No, it's a sad, it terrible.

SG: You had been home for a while before they came to the peace settlement over in Korea...

DM: They started actually ending the talks in '53 and I came home in October of '52.

SG: So was it weird to be hearing about peace?

DM: No, I don't know, not that I know much things that I know of. I should have paid attention to it, but I didn't. Because I had an awful lot... Media wasn't as strong like we are now... you know, where we know every move that everybody makes.

SG: Yeah, it's definitely changed a lot over the years.

DM: Yeah.

SG Is there anything else you want to put in, any other experiences you had over there that you'd like to share?

DM: One experience that I was glad I had, I went to Japan at the camp overlooking Mount Fugiama. We had a couple of days off, so another fella and I, we got permission to go to town and we climbed Mount Fugiama clear to the top. Took some nice pictures of the crater.

SG: Nice.

DM: Very Interesting. I got some beautiful pictures of it.

SG: Do you still have them?

DM: Oh yes.

SG: I'd love to see them sometime.

DM: Well, you can. I have them all here. And then, I went to move into Korea, it was really quiet, not much going on and another fella and I got to climb one of those hills, you know, they were pretty steep hills, so we asked the captain if we could go on up the hill and take a look across the country, we just wanted to look, and he said, yeah, ok but boy take that steal helmets with ya. So we said, ok. So we put on our steal helmets and climbed up that hill, there was no problem, but it wasn't loud, it was quiet, and we were

far enough to and... we looked out across that country and oh, it is a beautiful, beautiful country. Rolling hills and beautiful greenery. Korea is a lot, the same pretty close to the same longitude as the Great Lakes, the 45th parallel.

SG: Oh, ok.

DM: 45th? No, that was 38, so close. By the way, I really enjoyed the scenery. I have pictures of it. Other than that a bad experience I had, when I was leaving down to the town of "chan" at the southern tip of Korea to get on the boat to go back to Japan, I developed the most horrible tooth ache that I had had for ages. So they caled in the dentist, and you know, I'd heard these army dentists were just butchers. That guy was just as good as dentist as you'd ever want to have. Boy, he was just, in a shot, pulled it out. And he said, do you want to save it, and I said oh yeah, I want that more than you do. I saved that thing and I had it for years, but I finally gave up and I put a crown on it..

SG: So the anxiety was actually worse than the actual procedure?

DM: Yeah, he was a good dentist.

SG: I just had one other question that I came up with... Did you know Grandma before you went over to Korea?

DM: No.

SG: You didn't know her? You met her after you got back?

DM: I came out of Korea at 24, and she is 8 years younger. You know how old she was?

SG: She was 16.

DM: Yeah, she was a little young at the time. But I met her in late '52 or '53, and I met her a year later it would have been 17 and we were married a year later, it would have been 18.

SG: I was trying to do the math because I know that mom was born in '55, so I was trying to come up with the math there.

DM: Before I went in when I was 22, she was pretty darn young, but don't tell her because she's catching up on me. But don't tell her that.

SG: Ok, I won't, I promise. Well, thank you so much for letting me call and interview you.

DM: Your welcome. By Golly, I think you're doing great by gosh, and keep up the great work!