

Eric Walz History 300 Collection

Earl Danielson— Life During WWII

By Earl Danielson

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Box 1 Folder 6

Oral Interview conducted by Eric Kraus

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Brigham Young University – Idaho

EK: I guess we could just start off with question number one. It says, "Where were you born?"

ED: I was born in Garfield, Idaho, which is a local farming community just north of Ucon. So I've practically lived in the same area all my life.

EK: Did you join the military or did you . . . ?

ED: No, after Pearl Harbor I tried to enlist with two of my friends. They got in but the Navy wouldn't take me because of colorblindness. So I sat back and waited to be drafted.

EK: And were you then?

ED: I was drafted about a year later.

EK: A year after Pearl Harbor?

ED: I was only 19 when Pearl Harbor was attacked.

EK: What do you remember about Pearl Harbor Day?

ED: It was quite devastating to know that we had got into war.

EK: So you were pretty surprised when Japan attacked us?

ED: That was a surprise. I didn't really expect that.

EK: You say you were 19 at the time?

ED: Yes.

EK: After the whole Pearl Harbor thing happened, is that when you and your friends decided that you wanted to enlist?

ED: The next day!

EK: The next day, huh?

ED: Yes.

EK: They took them and not you?

ED: Yes, but they didn't go right in immediately. Because they just couldn't handle all the volunteers. All the volunteers they had. They had to wait until they could handle them. But they did both go into the navy.

EK: And then you were drafted later?

ED: Yes, I was drafted later. I went into the Army.

EK: Did you serve in the European front?

ED: Yes, Europe.

EK: How was that for you?

ED: Well, it wasn't hazardous for me and my outfit. We were in the medical battalion. And they pretty much respected the Red Cross. We had Red Cross on our helmets and on our tents. The big Red Cross was painted on them. WE were never intentionally attacked in any way, but we were fairly close to the front lines and all that.

EK: What kind of places were you at?

ED: Our outfit, and this was after. . . I was drafted in November of 1942 and I went to basic training in Texas and had extended training in Texas and special hospital training in Springfield, Missouri at what they call O'Riley General Hospital which was the military general hospital and then after the time came for us to go overseas which was September 1943, we spent ten more months in England and then we went to France in the Normandy invasion. Our unit was assigned to the 7th Corps, which was the section of the 1st Army. They landed at Utah beach. Our unit landed on the 8th day of June, which was the 2nd day after D-Day.

EK: Was there still a lot of fighting going on then?

ED: Oh, yes. In the afternoon, we went on tour with one of the regular assault boats. We went over the side of our liberty ship on the rope ladders, went down into the assault boats that were bouncing up and down on the waves. There were probably 40 or 50 of us in an assault boat and they went to the beach as far as they could go until they hit the sand and then they dropped the front ramp[and we went out into the water which was about waist deep and waded to shore even on the second day. This was about 4:00 in the afternoon and there wasn't an awful lot of shooting that we noticed right then. About 10 or 11 o'clock at night when our aircraft had to go back to England to land because they didn't have night flying instruments like they do now. Then the German airplanes came out and there was just all kinds of. . .it was more noise than any 4th of July you ever heard of around here. It was just that quick, that quick of a change! Our troops had pretty well control of that little strip of beach, which was probably 3 miles deep in from water. Like I said, we were on Utah Beach. The other 4 beaches were on down the line further. Our unit was running on Utah Beach. Our hospital wasn't even on the beach by then. We just did what first aid we could as was needed. It was 3 or 4 days before our hospital was hauled on shore. They set up our tents and operated like we should.

EK: Being in a medical unit, what was your job, specifically?

ED: My particular job was a medical technician. I just did more or less what I was asked to do, whether it was cleaning a patient up or getting them ready for what they had to do. Later on when we had more stable situations, we gave shots, and medications. We changed dressings. Real early on the beach we didn't bother to keep any patients at all. We just put them on a ship and hauled them back to England.

EK: Because you were in the medical unit were you involved with most of the medic type stuff, the bandaging, etc?

ED: Always. That's all. . . Later on when we started keeping a few patients, like you would get them back on their feet and back to their units, we would give shots and medication and take care of them. We did a lot of ward duty taking care of the patients at night. They always needed something.

EK: So, from Normandy did you see anywhere else?

ED: We just went straight through across France and Belgium. We got into Belgium and went across Luxembourg and went into Germany. Our units got as far east as Leipzig, Germany. That is the furthest we got when the Armistice was signed, which was 11 months later.

EK: That was after Normandy, right?

ED: Yes.

EK: How long after the Armistice did you stay in?

ED: They pretty well started disbanding the European troops then. They had a point method to where they decided which ones came home and went to the Pacific and which ones came home and was discharged and things like that. I was kind of in the middle. It was two months before they shipped us home.

EK: Did you see any other battles while you were there, Normandy of course being the big one?

ED: It was all a battle, the whole thing. I told you we had about a 3 mile beach head at Normandy, well after about a month of that, they got enough troops and equipment on shore that they had they called a St. Lo breakthrough. At our particular beach, that's where they broke through enemy lines, a place called St. Lo. After the infantry and the armored division went through, they just spread out and then the other units went through. They had bombed this area right in front of the line. There were box cars upside down, railroad tracks on end. It was just a jumbled mess. They had bulldozers on the front of Sherman tanks. They just bulldozed a path through it. That's how they made a road through there. Then later on the tanks with bulldozer blades on, they used them in the

hedgerows fighting. France had all kind of, instead of fences, they had hedgerows. You'd go across the field and nothing would be showing and you would come out past the end of one of those hedgerows and there might be a German tank sitting there. A tank with a gun trained right on you. That was kind of disastrous so we got wise to their tricks and used those bulldozers on those hedgerows. As we progresses across France out of the beachhead, we saw all kinds of wreckage, such as gliders that had been wrecked. This was the troops that landed right at D day, right at H hour they called it, the very first hour and some of them even before. There were a lot of the gliders. They just towed them over there and cut them looses. They would glide down to a landing. They would have a platoon in them and they would do what they could. WE saw all that kind of stuff. Across France it was pretty much hit and run. We didn't do any fighting but was fairly close to the front where they were doing the fighting. Our hospital had two platoons. It was two separate hospital units that kind of leap-frogged. One would jump ahead and set up and operate. The one behind would dismantle or refurbish the supplies and get ready to leap frog ahead when it was their turn. That's the way our hospital operated. Somewhere along the line, you might have two days off or you might just barely get your stuff unloaded and have to load it back up and move again. It was across that they were moving pretty fast.

EK: How long did it usually take to set up and dismantle your hospital?

ED: It was a just a matter of a couple hours or so because we had 4 man tents that we used for our hospital. Sometimes we would set up one; sometimes we would set up four, depending on how many we had need for. I don't remember just timing it, but they would just set them up one at a time anyway. If the infantry and armored units were moving that fast, there were less casualties than if they were launched in a hedgerow battle or in a town where there were a lot of houses and that, there were more causalities. We had more operations to do or more medical work to do.

EK: Once casualties came in, did you operate on them and then send them back?

ED: After we started across France, if they needed anything serious, we would send them back to the next hospital, which was a field hospital. They had better facilities. It wasn't a matter of what you would call serious operations unless it was for a lifesaving purpose. They did what they could to keep them alive and what had to be done to assure their better recovery. Even in the middle of France, they would ship them back to England as quick as they could.

EK: Your hospital was just a temporary point, then. . .a quick fix?

ED: Yes. There were a few that we would just put a bandage on or something and let them go back to their unit.

EK: Did you have any patients that kind of stuck with you for so many moves?

ED: No, not until later on. Not until after we got into Germany. There were a few who might stay for a day or a week or something like that. Not that we wanted to keep them with us. . .It was something like a broken ankle or something like that. They could still carry on some activities and yet they wouldn't go back to their unit until it was better.

EK: Being in Germany, did you have any experiences like the Concentration Camps?

ED: Yes, and I have some pictures of concentrated camps that we saw. We didn't do any medical aid to any of them. We got into one place that you don't hear about it on the news. It was called Nordhausen. It was more of a slave labor camp, but that's the same thing as a concentration camp. We got in there two days after the infantry did that, liberated them and opened it up. They had already taken care of the ones that were still alive and did what they could for them. Their first aid personnel, each military unit has a first aid men right with each squad. Then the company has the first aid unit or whatever you call it. I don't what they have to setup for tents or a station. But then the further on back would be the corps, which is usually made up of anywhere from 3 to 5, 6, 7 battalions or 7 divisions and that's what we were. A medical battalion attached to the 7th Corps. Our battalion had 5 companies. There was the headquarters company, 3 ambulance companies, and ours was the clearing company, the hospital company, the one I was in. There was 500 men in that battalion. When we first got into Germany, we went past a town called Hawkin. They were pretty well surrounded. They would surround the town rather than just go in and take it over. They were pretty well entrenched in there and they just surround them and laid siege. They sat there and fired artillery into it for 2 or 3 months it seemed like. Right about that time the Battle of the Bulge started. This was just slightly before Christmas time. That was basically south of where we were. But at the same time they told us to load up. They loaded our units up and we moved south and set up our hospital. The whole corps moved down there to stop this battle where the Germans broke through the line. That was the nearest we came to getting into trouble, because they hauled our platoon in and unloaded us and told us to set up our hospital and, they went back for the other half. The motor pool which is the guys that drove the trucks, they would haul one and then go back and get the other one. The day after they left to go back to get the other platoon, there was a military patrol came by on what they call a halftrack. They said, "What are you guys doing up here? There's nothing between you and the Germans but a halftrack up there on the crossroad." A halftrack is kind of like a heavy-duty pickup truck, really, only it's a military vehicle that has tracks on the back where the wheels are. The front has regular wheels. It carries some heavy guns and stuff like that but it's nothing to fight an army with.

EK: Exactly.

ED: We were stuck! We had to stay! Nothing ever came of it. It was pretty dicey weather. It was cold and stormy and dark and cloudy and overcast. We were there for 3 days and the sun came out one morning. It was about the 23rd of December. I'm not sure, the 23rd or 24th. The sun came out and the sky was just full of bombers and I mean full!

EK: Wow!

ED: They pretty much stopped the flow of the German troops coming through.

EK: Were these American bombers?

ED: Yes, yes. B-17's B-24's and the smaller attack bombers and that. You could just see planes everywhere!

EK: Wow!

ED: They laid down a curtain of bombs. They pretty much stopped any threat of the troops coming any further, right in our area, anyhow. I don't know how it was on the other areas. The Battle of the Bulge probably poked a wedge into our lines. At the base it may have been about 100 miles wide, I don't know. It was just kind of like a triangle out to a point. We finally got our hospital set up and then we were finally relieved by the other platoons set up back where it was safer. They came and hauled us out. WE were never attacked. We were never shelled in that particular setup. It turned out all right the way it was. That was the nearest we came to being in real danger.

EK: Being in Germany and of course fighting against Germany, were you ever called upon to provide medical aid for Germans?

ED: Yes. Lots of time when there was real close contact; and especially if we pushed over an area; there were always casualties that they left behind. We would always take care of our own troops first. If there was time, then they would take care of the enemy soldiers. They took care of them just like they did our own as far as I could tell. Of course, a few of them needed translators and that. They never neglected any that I know of. Then they were taken by the MP's to prison camps. We didn't have to care for them in our camps. We did have several instances where we had enemy troops to take care of.

EK: Were there any animosities?

ED: Yes. Especially when the litter carriers started carrying them in; that's the stretcher carriers. I noticed one particular instance; I don't know whether they had an infantryman help carry that stretcher or what; but they actually rolled one guy off on the ground. I remember that.

EK: Really?

ED: I don't know at this point whether it was done on purpose or not. I have no way of knowing.

EK: Okay.

ED: It did show up, whether it was intentional or not who knows.

EK: What rank were you?

ED: I was what they called a T5. I was a technician, 5th grade, which was a corporal. I had two stripes.

EK: You were that up until you came home, then?

ED: Yes.

EK: As far as your training, back in the days before you were shipped off to the war, did you feel that you were trained sufficiently for that?

ED: Yes. Yes. We went through real good training as far as I was concerned. It was real good training. We had all the basic; which all soldiers get. Then we went to secondary training in San Antonio, Texas. My first basic was in Abilene, Texas. Then I went to San Antonio; which was called Fort Sam Houston. We had classroom training and stuff like that and then I was shipped out to maneuvers in Louisiana and eastern Texas. That's where you did things like you would do in a battle. You lived in tents. You took care of things like you would in a battle situation.

EK: During that, were you doing your medical stuff then or were you just doing more combat oriented stuff?

ED: No. We did both. We did both. Once we got into secondary training we didn't have any combat type things. We were never issued any guns. Well, I shouldn't say never, because when the Battle of the Bulge started, they issued us guns for standing guard duty only. We didn't have nay combat training.

EK: Just your initial combat training, right?

ED: Just your basic training that everybody got.

EK: You didn't have any weapons or anything when you came to the beach at Normandy.

ED: No. uh-uh.

EK: How did you feel about that? I mean were you scared?

ED: Being a medical unit, it didn't sound of the ordinary to me. I mean, I thought it was the way it should be.

EK: Yeah, I understand that medical units are not supposed to have weapons or anything, but just coming on the beach knowing there had been a lot of fighting, were you scared not being able to defend yourself?

ED: No. Not really. I don't remember. Truthfully, it was almost like a picnic going there on the afternoon. It was fairly quiet. The shooting, if there was any you could hear, it was three miles away.

EK: So, the battle line had been forced up the beach?

ED: Yeah. It moved inland. The only thing scary about going in on the beach; which was the 2nd day, was we were kind of pulled up where we were intended to stop, I guess. The captain of the ship probably knew that. I didn't know it. We were stopped. A little military ship of some kind came along side and probably conversed with the captain telling him what to do or gave his orders or his timeline or when to start unloading stuff. Within a minute or 2 or 3 he started up. The little boat started up and went on ahead. He hadn't got out there 200 feet when he hit a mine.

EK: Ooh. . .

ED: It just went up in the air with a pool of water. When that water came back down, that boat went down with it. All that was showing was the tip of the mast showing up above the water.

EK: Wow!

ED: I haven't to this day, of course I have no way of knowing what ship it was, how big it was, whether it was a fighting ship or just a little escort or what, I have no way of knowing. It went right down and even though we were their medical unit, they did not distract as one bit from our goal of getting on the beach. They had Navy units that took care of that ship if there were any survivors. That was one of the hairy things that happened while we were waiting to get on the beach. Now after the Battle of the Bulge ended which was probably in January some time, we were still in France then, the eastern part of France. We moved back and set up our hospitals. By then it was wintertime and we set up our hospitals in buildings. One place was set up in a schoolhouse. Even the men used houses to live in rather than tents. By then things had slowed down to where we might be in one place for 2 or 3 weeks or 4 weeks or a month and a half, who knows, it all varied. Then as spring came on and progressed, they started to cross into Germany or at least we did. I don't know how far ahead the infantry lines were. It was in April that we got into that concentration camp. It was, like I said, a slave labor camp that they had set up and they had really bombed it just the day before because the aircraft unit had seen activity there and they thought that it was a troop place or something. (Looking at photo) This is what it looked like the 3rd day when we got there. And this was in April of 1945. Like I said, They had taken out already the live ones; any that showed any life at all. And these were the ones that were left. They made the towns people, the German civilians, carry all of them guys out there and lay them in rows so they could try and identify them. This big building, you can see here is 1, 2 and there was another one and over here on this side there was 3 more just like it. There were 6 buildings there. They were probably 100 feet wide and 200 feet long. The damage was done by the bombers

that hit the day before. We didn't have anything to do with the live ones. We didn't have to do any first aid.

EK: Did you have to help bury these bodies?

ED: No, they made the German civilians do it. They dug a trench with the bulldozers, this big long trench. I don't know how big it was, really. You see this door here with a couple of boards across underneath. They made them put it on there and carry them over to that big trench. That's how they carried them. And all those people, their only comment was, "We didn't know what was going on here." And they lived right in town.

EK: Were these people Jewish?

ED: I have no way of knowing. They were political prisoners, people taken in there to get all the work out of them as long as they could and then after that they could just let them die. My daughter teaches at the High School in Shelley. She teaches American Government and World History. She was teaching class one day. They had a documentary film that she had got from the department of education or somewhere. She was sitting there doing something and one of the students said, "Mrs. Stuart, stop the film." She stopped it and turned it back and that picture right there was on that documentary film. It was just a stark contrast. He's just bare naked and nothing but bones.

EK: Are these pictures that you took?

ED: I took these. This is me standing up here.

EK: I see here the Eiffel Tower.

ED: After this we went on R&R. That is rest and recuperation they called it. It was about 3 weeks later. We either went to Paris or through Paris. I had one roll of film. That's all I had. I got seven pictures out of it. We were leap-frogging and we happened to be in this town. We kind of went into a rest and refurbished our equipment and stuff. They came and got us and said, "we want to show you people something." They took us over there. And then they took us over and showed us what they call a crematorium, the furnace and bring them out and dump them in the pit. Then they put another one on. And I didn't have any film.

EK: What were your feelings when you saw all of this?

ED: It's unbelievable to see something like that first hand. We had to handle a few patients that actually died, some that you couldn't do anything with. You couldn't save them. Something like that is enough to give you nightmares. You see that there must have been close to 2000 corpses laying there. My daughter had used those pictures in every class she has given. She has had them enlarged to show them better to the class.

That was at Nordhausen. I don't know why but you never hear anything about it. You always hear about Auschwitz, Belzenbergin. But it was part of the concentration system.

EK: What were your images of Hitler and Mussolini before and after you saw the concentration camp?

ED: We knew then why we were there and why we needed to be there. I never saw or heard much about Mussolini. He was further south of where we were. They were still allied together the two of them. We knew we were doing what had to be done.

EK: Your friends that were in the Navy . . . did they serve in the Pacific front?

ED: They both were in the Pacific.

EK: Did you stay in contact with them throughout the war?

ED: Pretty much. The one fellow was injured fairly early and came home after about a year. Of course being in the Pacific, they went right into fighting while I was still in training. He was home probably before we landed on Normandy. I think he came home in 1943. He injured his feet by falling off the ladder or something and landed on the steel deck and injured his feet. The other fellow, he went through the whole war in the Pacific and came home. I worked with him for 25 years after the war. We both went to work on the fire department. I worked with him until we both retired.

EK: Did you trade war stories?

ED: Yeah, pretty much. We stayed in contact. He still lives here in town. We visit with him occasionally.

EK: Did he see anything? Was he on a ship?

ED: Yes. He was on a small destroyer. He saw several battles. He was in the actual fighting. I don't know what his stories were compared to mine. But he was in combat.

EK: What was his name?

ED: His name was Morgan Parks.

EK: Did you make any other new friendships while you were in Europe, people that you kept in contact after the war?

ED: Not really. I have only contacted one person that I served with in our unit. They came to Yellowstone Park in 1967, sometime along there. He knew that I lived in Idaho Falls. They came to Idaho Falls on their way out of the park. He called me up and they stopped and visited us. That's the only one I've ever seen.

EK: How was that for you?

ED: It was enjoyable. We enjoyed visiting. He had family with him and by then we had family here. We enjoyed visiting. It is kind of odd out 500 men he is the only one I've ever talked to.

EK: How do you feel that your life has been changed as a result of World War II?

ED: I think it gave me training in a few instances that I have used since. I went to work in the fire department. We always had first aid personnel and then we got into the ambulance service. Even though I didn't serve on the ambulances, I was in administration by the time we took them over. It helped in that respect. It might have influenced what I went into as a life occupation. I'm sure it influenced on how we look on life itself. How we value life and how we more or less resolve to do what should be done and do what's right.

EK: How did your religious beliefs help you cope with your military experience?

ED: We went in at a time when things were pretty hectic. There is no doubt that the front of that assault drops down and they say get out of here and wade over to the land. You better be thinking pretty close to Lord, that's all I can say. I can't imagine there being any atheists in a situation like that.

EK: Always thinking of a higher being, not knowing where you're going to be the next day, right?

ED: Right. It's better to think you've got somebody on your side.

EK: You said you were on the home front for a year before you got drafted. How was that being at home during the war?

ED: It was really not much of a change. I was disappointed that I couldn't volunteer to go right in, but out of the three of us, only one got to go in fairly soon. He got injured and came home. The other one, I even worked with him. We worked on a cattle ranch up at Alpine on the cattle ranch in the winter right after Pearl Harbor and into the early part of 1942. So I worked with him. We just had a job to do, just waiting to get into the service.

EK: How did the community view the war? Was there a lot of concern about it?

ED: Why sure. We were in it pretty thick and heavy by then. We were quite unprepared, really. But, it really didn't hit home because we weren't involved in it here ourselves. The ones that were in the active service and out in those front units, they were involved in it. None of us ever hit here at home. The big push was to do everything you can. They had ways that civilians could do things. And of course things were rationed.

EK: How was that, the rationing?

ED: Gasoline and tires and some food items was rationed. And you only got so much because they were saving. They wanted to make sure the military had all they needed.

EK: How did your family feel about you going off into the military? Being drafted?

ED: They didn't . . . uh . . . I suppose they were sad to see us go, but I don't think they felt that I should stay home or anything.

EK: Did you have any friends that went and didn't come home?

ED: There were quite a few in our school, that I went through school with in junior high and the first and second year of high school that didn't come home, that I can remember.

EK: How did that make you feel?

ED: You didn't realize it until after it was over and you were home yourself. Those pictures I just showed you, it made you realize it can happen.

EK: Last question. What are some of the most vivid memories of the World War II experience that stand out in your mind?

ED: Well, the most vivid, I think the most vivid is those concentration camp pictures. And the second is that little patrol boat that blew up in front of us, and leaving home to start with. The training was pretty grueling. I can remember all the training days. We walked probably 10,000 miles in training. In England, we use to train everyday. We use to hike, walk and walk. One day we went out and walked a 15-mile hike. And we come back to the barracks and they had been through and made an inspection, and they was dissatisfied with the inspection and they made us go out and do another 7-mile hike.

EK: Wow.

ED: 23 miles that day . . . 22 miles. And after we got on the beach at Normandy, I don't think we ever walked any further than the end of the chow line. But the idea was conditioning. It got you in condition to withstand, to be able to stand the hardships. By then I was 21 years old. Those are probably the four most vivid things I can remember. As far as patients, handling injured patients, the one that sticks in my mind the most and affected me the most, was when I was in training at Springfield, Missouri at O'Riley General Hospital. They took us into one of the wards. And one of the patients there had a hole in his back right by the side of his backbone. It was about like that; you could put your hand in it. And it was all healed over as smooth as can be. Somehow that just affected me; I just almost turned inside out. Just made me sick to see that injury to that person. Other than that scar he appeared to be alright. But after we got on the Normandy beach, I went through situations. One of the first things I did was, a bunch of people was laying out, soldiers were laying out on stretchers and one guy begged me for a drink of

water. I raised him up with my arm under his shoulder and gave him a few sips of water. When I laid him back my arm was blood red with blood all the way. Things like that almost turn you inside out, but you go on to the next guy and do what you can for him. One night I was on a detail looking for some blankets, they sent me out to a little supply area to get some blankets. I grabbed up an armful of blankets and there were seven dead soldiers laying underneath there covered up with those blankets, waiting for the grave registration unit. Things like that if you're right in the middle of it you do what you can and go on and continue. We were in combat 11 months from Normandy to Leipzig, Germany and we never lost a man in our unit. We never had an injury. We never had anybody injured in any type of accident. Nobody killed.

EK: That's pretty good.

ED: Well, we were never under attack. We always heard artillery shells and stuff like that. There wasn't any that ever landed very close to us. We had what they call a buzz bomb land out in the field about a half mile from us one time. A buzz bomb is what they called a C1 rocket. Germany developed these rockets that were preprogrammed. They had just enough fuel to get to their destination. They were unmanned. And then when they ran out of fuel they dove down and suppose to hit the target. Well, this one malfunctioned somehow and landed way short and landed about a half mile from where we had our hospital set up. That's one of the closest instances. We had our hospital set up in schoolhouse in Seny, Belgium. And it blew all the windows out of the schoolhouse and we had blankets on the windows of course. (Looking at photos) June '45, it was earlier than that. There's Leipzig, Germany. That's as far east as we got. There's the buzz bomb crater and that's me standing down in the bottom of it.

EK: Wow.

ED: When I was in England we lived in a castle. 500 men were in that building.

EK: Was it pretty tight? Tightly packed?

ED: Not really. There was . . . pretty big sized place. They had guys pretty spread out. I think there were 18 guys in our room. The front of the castle is over here and we were billeted in this room right here. There was 18 men in one room.

EK: Wow. I think that's about all the questions I had. We covered about everything.