Howard Murdoch – Life during WWII

By James Howard Murdoch

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Oral Interview conducted by Tyrell J. Robertson

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Brigham Young University – Idaho
TR: Okay, go ahead.

HM: My name’s James Howard Murdoch. I was born in Rupert, Idaho. I was the only out of ten brothers and sisters, I was the only one born on the farm where my father homesteaded. I was born out there and went to school, happy school, farming, and then we moved to Ashton when I was in eighth grade. And we, my dad had a little dairy. We’d been farming, but he got too old for that, and so he sold the farm, and we moved down with the cows, and we had a little dairy in Ashton. And so we were still doing that when I went into the army. And then after my brother went into the army too, my dad had to quit, ‘cuz he was quite old and so he quit the dairy then. But I wanted to enlist, but I was colorblind and the marines wouldn’t take me, but I finally got into the air force and then they, and I kept wondering why they wouldn’t take me to school. But they kept me. And I said I went up to Mt. Charleston to that rest camp and I was doing the PX up there. And finally they took another group and sent them off to war. And I asked the man, the officer once, “Why can’t I go?” And he said, “Oh…” And he had a reason for it, but he never would tell me. And that was, I was sure…

TR: Because you were colorblind.

HM: So anyway and finally the call came and he said I was going overseas, and so I did. And I went overseas. But I was in England, and I was in England on D-Day. A week later we went to France then. And they, we wasn’t even assigned yet then you see, displaced person then I guess you call it. But they put us in what they call a first quarter master trucking company. We hauled aviation gasoline to the B-17s, not the fighters—just the gasoline. And we had 45 tractors and 75 trailers. And I started out on maintenance and their service outfits, and they moved me around, and I pulled my share of KP. Finally, they asked me to be an officer’s orderly. I even go to do that! And I was that when I came home, but we sure had some good officers. I liked them, and on the last day we were there, I was with my commanding officer and we were talking and he says, “Well I’ll see ya at the Salt Lake Temple!” He wasn’t even a member! And I haven’t seen him yet either! But they treated me good. I had good friends. It sure helps to be a good example because it, a lot of the guys when they would go to town or something they’d ask me to go with them because they knew if I was with them they wouldn’t get into any trouble. Anyway we finally, I was in the states nineteen and a half months and I was overseas nineteen and a half months. But there was one experience, one thing that happened, and I know I was sure blessed. We had, we took over this big vacant building, and they brought the tanks and truckers and trailers right in there, and I’m not so sure the floor is even strong enough, but anyways they brought one in and loaded it with gas one times and unhooked it, and there was 4000 gallons of gas in this tanker. And well, there’s two landing ones, little ones on the front of those semis.

TR: Yeah.

HM: And when they let it down, the truck pulled out and it went right down through this cement floor and the front of the tanker hooked on the hitch and broke ‘er, tore a hole in the tanker and 4000 gallons of gas leaked out on the floor. And I went out there, and I
really didn’t even have any business being out there anyway, but I like to go check things out. And there was all that gas leaked out all over the floor in this building where they do their maintenance on these vehicles. I was standing right in the gas, and the captain was standing right there by me, and they bought another truck-in-tractor and trailer-in—and loaded it with water, was gonna wash all of that out. And this tractor didn’t have a muffler on it. And I says, “You’re not going to let that tanker come in here are you?!?” And he hollered at ‘hem to stop, but it didn’t. They couldn’t hear him. And it came on in. And when it stopped it backfired. And just instantly gas started burning, and I was about as far as from here as the TV from it. I started running, and so did the captain. And when we finally got to the other side going out the door, his shoes was on fire, but mine wasn’t. I was just that far ahead of him. But I was standing right there by the truck when the driver jumped out and he fell. But there was nothing I could do to help him. And so he died from the burns he got that night. And that’s, I guess that’s the closest scrape I ever had. But there’s a lot of experiences too. I pulled guard duty and anything they needed me to do I guess. But the fact that I was colorblind, I just never did get to be an airplane mechanic. But I was still doing that when we came home, just helping to maintain the outfits that we had there, and then we turned all the outfits in, like everyone else did. They just went and parked everything, the airplanes and everything; you see them just parked everywhere, and I understand most of that stuff just got dumped in the ocean. And then we went to Germany. We went all the way from France—all the way through England, France, Holland, Belgium, and Germany. Germany is where we got out papers to come home or orders to come home.

TR: Yeah.

HM: You got to ride the old forty and eight. Have you heard of those trains that the first veterans of World War—they’d have eight horses and forty soldiers in each car. And they have small cars over there—train cars. And so that’s what we thought we was riding in. We didn’t have the horses, but there was about fifty of us in those cars. And we spend two or three days coming back to France to get ready to come home. And we got on the Liberty ship and they’re not very big. And talking to a guy that’s never been on the ocean very much—you don’t get used to—you don’t know how bad the storm can really good experience. The bow of the ship would go under the water and then it would come up and water would run all the way down the top of the deck, of the back end, and while the bow was down here, the screws up here were going like this. And it just shakes the heck out of ya. And that went on for about three days, and then it finally quit. And we finally made it home after about eighteen days. And then we got on the train of course and come back to Salt Lake where we left from, the same base we had left from Salt Lake, and finally got home. And it was a good experience. I made a lot of friends. And I was glad I could do something for Uncle Sam and for our country.

TR: Did you have a lot of friends from around here that served in the war?

HM: Oh yes. I think everybody did, my age.

TR: Did you ever see any of them over there?
HM: No, I didn’t, but I saw one from Utah that was the same name as mine, but we weren’t related.

TR: Oh.

HM: But nope, I didn’t ever see any of them, anybody that I knew. I felt bad about that too. I’d have liked to be with some of them—home people.

TR: So you served from 1941 until…?

HM: I went in October 1942.

TR: October 1942.

HM: And got out January of 1946.

TR: While you were over there did you make a lot of good friends?

HM: Yes. I’d get out once in a while and look through it and try to remember their names. Yes I did have a lot of good friends. There was one guy I was in the same tent with. And he was a good, I thought he was a good guy. I couldn’t think a thing wrong with him, but I knew he did drink a lot, because they couldn’t give him any responsibilities, and so they gave him a section eight discharge. One day he told me, he says, “My wife told me to stay close to that Idaho kid.” And I was the Idaho kid. Apparently, I must have had a good influence on him or something. I don’t know what he told his wife, but he must have said something in my favor. So it makes you feel pretty good when somebody does that. We had, I was, they were all good friends. And I enjoyed everyone of them. I can’t complain about the way I was treated. It was a good experience. I wouldn’t want to do it again. But I was glad do to something for my country.

TR: In what ways do you thing your experience with the war changed you?

HM: I’m sure I appreciated the church—being a member of the church. That was my only salvation. It kept me from drinking and smoking. I well, maybe appreciate my country more, but especially the church. It was a really good influence. It was a good influence on me.

TR: What was, when you were over there, what was your image or perception of Hitler and Mussolini? What was the general attitude?

HM: Well, I think nobody, I think we all had a kind of nasty attitude towards him. We were sure glad when they was advancing, and we were in Holland at the time they were liberated. And they closed up their stores, and they celebrated for a week. You couldn’t get into a store or do anything. It was very seldom we went to the store anyway. But for
some reason, the officers sent me after something, but the store closed. And for two weeks they just celebrated all night and day because they were liberated. And that was about the same way in every country—France, Belgium, and Germany. We weren’t in Germany long enough to…I was impressed with their autobahn highway. We were driving on that. But it was bombed real bad, but oh I was impressed on that. Those were super highways. We traveled on them quite a ways. We was in a jeep and we crossed an overpass or something, and they had dropped a bomb on it. Well, some of it was not completely up, but some of it they had just knocked a hole in it. And we would just drive around the hole on the way across. I forget why we went up there that time. And then we went back later to come home. We had to go to Germany to do something else, and I can’t remember. It was an officer and a driver and two of us, and I can’t remember the reason we really went up there. Well, I was going a furlough. I never did have a furlough. I never had a leave even—didn’t dare, didn’t want to take one. But as far as, I never did do anything fantastic or big or important or anything, but I don’t know what I was supposed to do. The colorblindness…

TR: Did you duty.

HM: Pardon?

TR: You did your duty.

HM: Yes, I had a good relationship with all my officers and GIs too.

TR: Did you have any friends from around here or people from around here that died in the war?

HM: Well, I had a cousin from here that did. And then I’m sure there were some. My memory is about as bad as anything. You know I can’t remember very much even those names of those who did die. Even though, I knew then very well. There wasn’t a lot from around here. Two or three probably is about all that was killed. And we didn’t lose any in our group. We never did lose any other than that one that burned. There’s only one time that we were ever attacked. We had to stay behind the lines; we were pretty safe. But one time, it was in a convoy, this tank that was hauling gas. Well I’m not sure if it was a convoy. But there was one guy that the enemy shot a bullet right down though his tank, but it didn’t explode, it was empty. But it bulled a hole right through the gas tank. And he was empty at the time. So that’s the only time that any of our planes was ever shot or our trucks were ever shot at. But as the war went on, it got further away from us too. It was right there by us when we first got there. We had to bail out in the night several times into the foxhole because of the bombing and the shooting that was going on.

TR: Was this in England?

HM: No it was in France at the time. We went over, D-Day, a week after D-day.
TR: What do you remember about D-Day?

HM: That morning, we were, we was in England, and we were standing in line waiting to eat, to get in the mess hall. And planes started coming over, and we knew what it was. When we saw the formation and the knotting, we knew that was it. We knew it was coming up anyway, but just didn’t know when. But that time we knew it then, and it was quite a sight—these 47s pulling gliders. And the sky was full, and it went on and on and on. And we knew it was then, that it was the real thing. Yep, I was fortunate. It seems like I was being protected the whole time, just because I was colorblind. But it was a good experience. I wouldn’t want it again, but I was sure glad I had that experience.

TR: Where were you when Germany surrendered?

HM: We were in Holland. Yep. Belgium or Holland was liberated first, apparently. And they went celebrating and then about a week later the whole war ended. And it took us about two or three months seemed like. Let’s see when did the war end? It took quite a while though before any of us got to come home. Well, you had to have so many points to come home. And I had, I can’t remember, sixty some odd points or something like that. It wasn’t a lot, but it was…I don’t think we particularly went by points anyway. Our whole unit was done was done away with and everybody went in their own direction and then come home.

TR: When did you first hear about the German concentration camps?

HM: Well, I don’t remember for sure, but we definitely heard about them. One day we were walking after our work was done, and we had nothing to do. And we started walking and we walked right into a German, it was a prison camp, it was American, but it had German prisoners. It was an eye opener to me to see that. I’m glad I did, but I was sure surprised to think that there was German prison camps so close to where we were at.

TR: What did you see there?

HM: We were probably in…Let’s see, Belgium…Well, we could have been in Holland, but I think that it was Belgium when we run into that camp. We had to park our trailers just out in the pastures, and when they’re full of gas they’re heavy. Sometimes we’d get up in the morning and they’d just be flipped over and laying right on their back, ‘cuz they’d sink down in the dirt. So after that, they started letting us park on an airfield some of the time where it was more stable and solid. But I was pulling guard duty one night, and the temperature make those tanks pop and bang. And it sounds like somebody was trying to sabotage us. And it was scary. You walked around, and you couldn’t ever see anything. But boy those tanks was just banging, but I decided that it was just the air, the temperature that makes them bang like that. And I kept hearing something else, and it was alive, and it was making quite a noise. Finally one night, I didn’t want to turn the light on, I was afraid somebody would shoot at me, but I did after putting up with it for several nights. I put it up, and it was these groundhogs. And they’re pretty good size. You never see them during the day, they hole up, and they… or hedgehogs or I guess you
call it. Hedgehogs, that’s what they were, because they have those hedges over there that divides everybody’s property. There’s just hedges everywhere, and it made it hard for the war too, because they would hide behind them. And they’d have to doze, take dozers, and doze a road through them for the army to go through. But I finally found out these darn hedgehogs was what making the racket. And they, during the day, they just curl up, and we don’t see them, you can’t find them. But boy at night, they get out and feeding, and squeal, squeak, and it was quite interesting. But it was scary to start with, before I found out what…well they didn’t scare me, I was scared when I heard those banging, like somebody was trying to damage our tankers.

TR: What was it like being a church member over there? Did you have a church service? Were there other LDS servicemen?

HM: I never got to see, to attend our church, once, until we started home. And we was waiting to come home, and I saw on the bulletin board. Oh let’s see that time, I went but there was no church. It was a reorganized church, but nobody showed up to that either. But I never did go to our own church until we come back. I guess it’s after we come back to France, waiting to get on a ship, and I got to go to church for the first time. And I helped to administer the sacrament. And there was this one guy who was from Utah. He said he was a member, but it wasn’t very long. And then they went out on a detached service, and I never did see him again, even when I got home, I didn’t get to see him. So I did miss it. I missed the church. And I was sure glad when I did get to go that time. I think we had a testimony meeting. There wasn’t too many there, maybe a dozen or so was probably about all. But I went to church. I went to the other churches a time or two with some of the guys. Not always, but I went three or four times as a denomination. Yeah, I missed the church, but I had guys some asked me to go to town with them or wherever they was going. Because they said, “I know if we’re with you we won’t do anything wrong.”

TR: What would you do in your off-duty time? What kinds of things?

HM: Oh, I stayed right in camp, very seldom ever left, even if somebody asked me to go. We didn’t have a lot to do. We didn’t have any rec-hall or anything. There wasn’t much to do. You just went to your own quarters and wrote letters. I remember one time; one guy had never got any letters for a long time. And his name was Burdock, and mine was Murdoch. So mail call come, and I had a whole stack of letters. Oh, I used to get a lot of letters! And this one guy, this Burdock, he went through my mail. He was sure I had some of his mail. And he didn’t get a thing! I got all this whole stack. My family was good to write to me. Of course there was ten of us, ten children in the family—ten brothers and sisters plus the parent. And then there was the neighbors, and you’d get letters from them so…

TR: Did you have any other brothers that served in the war?

HM: Yes, I had a younger brother. Well, he went in the service, but he was younger, and he never did go over. Oh! He was a medic, in the medics. And he went to Japan?
Philippines? No, let’s see…He didn’t have to go. He was in the service, but he never had to go to. He went to school, and he learned to be, and now he’s a lieutenant colonel, but he’s retired. But he went over to school and so he strayed in the army. He made a career out of it. So it was just him and I was the only ones in our family that had to go.

TR: What do you remember about December 7, 1941? About Pearl Harbor?

HM: We were at conference at Saint Anthony. Our stake was called the Yellowstone stake then, and it took in Saint Anthony and Ashton and that area around. And we had just got in the car to come home, and the radio had told about the attack. And it was quite scary. At that time, let’s see when was the date on that?

TR: December 7.

HM: And so I went in…no what was I doing? But anyway, I must have been old enough, but anyway, I went in and walked over is when I enlisted. So that was December then, and October is when I enlisted. October of 1942, when I went in to the…December, and when did they attack?

TR: December 7, 1941.

HM: Yeah, so it must have been the next October. And I was 20 I guess, I must have been 20. If I’d of waited any longer they would have drafted me. And I tried to enlist a time or two, but I was colorblind, and they wouldn’t take me. And so if I’d of enlisted again, they would have drafted. And they would have drafted me a week later. I just got out. I beat the draft by a week!

TR: What would they have drafted you into?

HM: Probably have been the infantry, and I probably wouldn’t be here reporting.

TR: Did you ever have any combat training?

HM: Nope. All our basic training, all that amounted to was marching. And it was there for us. And yep, why they’d spend all that time just to march, and as soon as that was over, they sent me up to MT. Charleston; we was in Las Vegas. And I went up to Mt. Charleston. And we run, take care of this ski hill. They had a big ski hill, and the army could go up there skiing. I’d done dishes and whatever and run the short-wave radio and done my share of KP. But then they put me on the PX, so I didn’t have to do any more dishes.

TR: What is the PH exactly?

HM: Post, er well uh, the mail come to it. But it was mostly sold just candy bars and stuff like that. It was a little store. It didn’t amount to much. Post Exchange is what they called. But on the main bases you could get uh, you could buy clothing and a lot of stuff,
but they didn’t have anything like that, just mostly candy and might have had a few shaving stuff or something like that. It was a nice place. Las Vegas is hot! You can hardly stand it, the temperature. And we was up there in the mountains, and it’s high. It was about 30 or 40 miles from Las Vegas. And they had this rest camp up there for gunners. The kids going to school went and had quite uh… and it was hard on them. A lot of them flunked and wash out going to school doing the things they had to do. And so they’d let them come up there for a week and give them a rest. I went down one day with a driver to pick up some of them to bring back up. It was interesting to get in there, in this, just a big chamber, but the air pressure was different stages when we got in. And then they have to adjust to the pressure before you go into the next one. And we went in and got uh, and we could see him. He was sitting there, but we couldn’t just walk in and get him. We had to go through these different stages to get, where the pressure was just right. And we went in and got him. And oh, he was just rubbing his knees and just really suffering. And he says a lot of guys wash out. Some of them can’t handle it. And that was an interesting experience. One interesting thing happened one day. We were off limits for planes to fly over, when we was up there at Mt. Charleston. And the commander of the main base or the airfield there at Las Vegas come up there for dinner one day. And there was a captain that was over us. And these planes, they were fighter planes. They would get over Mt. Charleston, and then they’d start diving on us. And they’d cut their engines, and when they’d get right down over us, then they’d open up the throttle. And it just sounded like the mountains was coming in on both sides. And the major, the colonel was up there this particular Sunday. And he just took out his notebook when these planes came over. He just took out his notebook and wrote the time. And we never saw another plane after that for weeks! Boy, all he had to do is find out who was flying at that time, and when he went back, they had a record of who it was probably. But we didn’t see any more planes for a long time. But oh, that was scary. They’d dive on us, and open that throttle just as they went over us. We was down in this canyon, you see, pine trees on both sides. It was interesting.

TR: Of your whole experience in World War II, what would you say is the most vivid memory? What sticks out the most in your mind?

HM: Oh, I guess the, I guess probably the scariest is when I was on that darn ship. But there was some scary times. I certainly appreciate what; you got to go through it to appreciate it. Our government and how well prepared we was, equipment we had, and how organized they was. It’s mind-boggling for a little guy that’s never been away from home, you know, to see what the world is really like. So it uh…I don’t know what’s the most impressive experience—just the fact that I was able to serve over a period of over 39 months. It was quite an experience. I hope we don’t have to do it again, but I respect and admire Uncle Sam and the American people. And all the guys I was with was glad to be able to serve, and I was. And I think that’s … the fact that you could serve is quite an accomplishment. And I’m glad I did. I feel good about it. I don’t know if I answered your question there, but…

TR: No, that’s good.