William Merrell– Life during WWII

By William Merrell

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Oral Interview conducted by Brooke Merrell

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Brigham Young University – Idaho
BM: Where were you born?

WM: I was born in Verdon, New Mexico, South Western New Mexico.

BM: How old were you on 7 December 1941?

WM: Sixteen.

BM: What do you remember about that day?

WM: What do I remember? Well, we had gone to our regular meetings and came home and, it was a fast meeting in the afternoon, fast and testimony meeting in the afternoon and when we came home we got to listening to the radio and learned that the Japanese had struck Pearl Harbor.

BM: What did you think when you heard about the attack?

WM: Well, I was just surprised. Of course I was just only 16 years old. Of course I didn’t know how long the war was going to last or whether I would be involved in it or not.

BM: Did you serve in the armed forces during the war?

WM: Yes, I served in the US Navy.

BW: And where did you serve?

WM: I served in a hospital in Seattle Washington for six months and the rest of my time was at Farragut Idaho.

BM: What was your rank and assignment?

WM: Well, my rank was Pharmacists mate third class. My assignment well, first I worked in the hospital in Seattle and then I came back to Farragut Idaho, and I went to a Dental technician school there and when I graduated from there I became—I work with the dentists there in the boot camp.

BM: Did you meet and make any new friendships during the war?

WM: Did I meet? Oh yeah, a lot of good friends and new people too. I have a good buddy that went through boot camp with me, and he… when we got out of boot camp he went to California to cooks’ school, and I stayed there at F1 for a hospital course school, and I hadn’t seen him for well since 19…that was January of 1944, and I still haven’t seen him, but I’ve talked to him on the phone within the last three years a number of times.
BM: Is there anything that you wish they would have told you before the war?

WM: I don’t think so. I was just a kid, and I wasn’t too concerned about the government. I was just in high school, and I was trying to go through high school.

BM: What was your image of Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito?

WM: What was that?

BM: What was your image of Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito?

WM: Well, we just didn’t like them because they were our enemies, and they were killing our American service men.

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

WM: I guess during the war while I was still there. I was discharged in 1946, June of ’46, and I suppose I had heard about them while I was still in the Navy.

BM: How did your life change as a result of World War II?

WM: How did my life change because of World War II? I earned the GI bill and that gave me the opportunity to go to college. So I went to college instead of staying on the farm.

BM: What did you major in, [at] college?

WM: I majored in Education and Vocational Agriculture?

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

WM: Did what?

BM: How did you religious beliefs help you, how did they affect you in the war by being LDS?

WM: How did what affect me?

BM: Did being a member of the church effect anything for you?

WM: Oh yeah, I stayed quite close to the church. I had friends, navy friends that belonged to the church there and every place that I went, and they helped me keep close to the church.

BM: How did you contribute as an individual in your community to the war effort?
WM: In the community for the war effort? Is that before I went into the service or after?

BM: All of it.

WM: Well when I was in High School, labor was hard to get on the farm and so in the Fall the farmers were not able to get labor to pick the cotton that grew in the valley where I was raised so we would got to school in the morning and take classes until 11 o’clock and by then dew and the frost had dried off of the cotton and then we all went out of school to different farmers’ fields and picked cotton until about 5 or 6 o’clock at night.

BM: Did you help your community out after the war?

WM: After the war? Well, right after the war when I went home, I went on my mission to the Eastern States mission and was there for two years and didn’t come home until December of 1948. And then I went to school and finally got married and came to Utah for more schooling and then after I graduated I came here and taught Vocational Agriculture at the high school.

BM: What did you remember about rationing?

WM: Russia?

BM: Rationing.

WM: Oh quite a bit, we were rationed on gasoline generally we only got four gallons in a week.

Arva Lue Merrell: Tires.

WM: What?

ALM: We were rationed on tires.

WM: We were rationed on tires, sugar, shoes. What else would they ration on? Some of the food stuffs, the cans in the grocery stores and such.

BM: You were still in Verdon then weren’t you?

WM: I was still there.

BM: How did the war affect them, from what you saw?

WM: The war affected the people in Verdon.

BM: How many boys your age served in the war, was there a lot?
WM: Oh yeah, most all of them. All of them—might have been two or three that didn’t go out.

BM: How many of them were there?

WM: Oh gosh, in my high school, which was real small, there were probably six to eight of us and we all went into the service. Most everyone went into the service, the young men. I missed a year of school when I was young because of an illness and so I was still in high school when I turned 18 and I started high school my senior year and I was drafted into the Navy in December of 1943, and so I wasn’t even able to finish my high school.

BM: How did you finish?

WM: I finished high school. I talked to my (inaudible) commander in boot camp, and he said, “well I used to be a high school principal and I felt that what you gain here will be more than enough to give you that. You should be awarded to be able to graduate.” And so wrote my high school principal and he said, “Well, just have him write me a letter,” and so I did. And so I was able to graduate and I had only gone to high school about three months of my senior year.

BM: Did you know any young men who did not return from the war?

WM: Yeah, and some of them—well there was one boy that came back, but he had been on a battle ship in the Japanese theatre because he’d been bombed, and I never did see him after that, but he…it affected him mentally, and he eventually committed suicide. Then there were just a few boys from my home…two or three of them from my home town that were lost in the war.

BM: How did their families cope with losing them?

WM: How did they cope with it? Oh they seemed to get along all right. The one boy’s Parents were quite old and they seemed to take it all right. They just lived with it there wasn’t anything they could do about it. The other boy was the same way, and his father had been born and raised as a young man in Germany, and then came to the United States and joined the church and was married and had a family there. And his son was killed by the Germans.

BM: This is sort of a question for Grandma. What was it like for you to have all the young men gone off to war?

ALM: Devastating, I didn’t go with any LDS boy other than the ones who came on leave and stopped by to see us from the time I was 18 until the time that I was around 23. That’s the dating time that’s the important time and there just weren’t any around. We couldn’t, silk stockings, nylon stockings were rationed. We’d have to line up in order to
get those towels; we had to line up in order to get towels. We went to the USO that was our recreation. We met a lot of good guys from all over.

BM: This is for both of you. Did either of you have father or brothers or boyfriends who served in the military?

ALM: No, I only have one brother, he was too young and my father was not in the service and, oh I had a brother-in-law who was with Patton’s 3rd army. And went and came up through North Africa, through Sicily into Italy, through Germany. He was one of the few men in his unit that were not… that came out alive without any injuries, without anything. He was mentally fine and still living. Right now he’s writing his life history. I had another brother-in-law that spent his 19th birthday in a foxhole in Germany, no Christmas Eve when he was 18, he spent [it] in a foxhole in Germany. He said he just sat there and cried. He said he was afraid and he was homesick. And then my other brother-in-law, my brother was too young. My other brother-in-law had health problems and was not taken into the service.

BM: What were some of your most vivid memories of World War II?

WM: What were some of my which?

BM: Your most vivid memories.

WM: Of World War II?

BM: Yeah.

WM: Hmm, I guess having to get along with less, like tires for a car and gasoline and rationing then we—rubber was scarce. The rubber came from the South Pacific, and we couldn’t get rubber to make tires. And so they gathered up the old tires and my father had a large truck, and he hauled ‘em. And they brought them to him and loaded them in his truck and then he hauled them to some place where they would ship them to places where they would make recaps for automobiles and truck tires. And even after the war we had a lot of recaps and that went along for a long time until the early 50’s they had recaps and steel was hard to get, and so in the little town where I lived they gathered all the scrap iron and brought it in. My father hauled it to El Paso on his truck. He had a great big tractor, and oh, I would say it would weigh two tons, and he said when he took that into their plant where they gathered this scrap iron they hooked onto that tractor with a magnet, then lifted it out of the truck and then would drop it on the, the scrap iron to break it up and they would just pick it up and drop it again, pick it up and drop it again, to break that scrap iron up and of course now we know how they use scrap iron with Nucor Steel up here.

ALM: I worked. I went and finished my freshman year at BYU war broke out that December. I was only 17, boy I wished I was home. But then after school was out I went to Salt Lake to work, and I ended up working at (Inaudible) Arms made about 30 to
50 caliber bullets. And I worked as the secretary, for the engineer, for the head of the lubrication department. All of the men in our department would go and keep all of the machines greased and going. But, there were lots of women working. That’s when women began taking over men’s jobs. At that time the small arms plant was clear out on the edge of the city, and it actually was on the same street as…

WM: Redwood Road.

ALM: Off Redwood Road where you go the Church Distribution Center. And some of my friends that I lived with, they were spot welders on radar tubes. Radar was a new thing and they… spot welders on these fine filaments of radar tubes. Then after, I went to work for International Harvester, and we were just one block from DNRG Railroad depot, and we used to watch the troops trains go through. We went and ate our lunch over at the depot, and there were lots and lots of times that the troop’s trains would go past or were stopped there for something, and lots and lots of young men.

BM: Where were you on V-day, when you found out that the Germans…?

WM: The Germans? I was in Farragut Idaho working there on the navy base.

BM: What do you remember about that day?

WM: There wasn’t too much celebration because we still had a war on with Japan.

ALM: I remember VJ (Victory over Japan) day.

WM: Oh yeah.

ALM: Everybody just went crazy downtown, all the service men in the area, everybody just went nuts. It was so exciting.

WM: I was in the Navy for VJ and in a meeting, and it was a regular navy captain that was conducting the meeting. And he didn’t care whether the war ends or not because he was going to be there. But these old dentists that had left their practices to go into the service, they were drafted into service. We were there on the base and they told us that when the war was over they had [a] big whistle that you could hear all over the base, and they would blow that real hard, and uh, we were in that meeting that this old captain was conducting being trained how to keep some records, dental records. And that thing began to whistle and those old Dental officers, Navy officers they just jumped up and whopped and hollered, and this old Navy captain just sat back down, that not important, so we had to sit back down, all of us, and go on and finish that meeting with him.

BM: How did you feel about what happened with Japan and the atomic bomb and Hiroshima and Nagasaki? How do you feel about the atomic bomb being dropped?
WM: Oh, the atomic bomb really saved thousands of lives because it brought an end to the war with Japan, and if we had to have [to] fight them on, we would have had to invaded Japan. And we’d lost a lot of lives, but as it was they were not able to go on and fight, and so they just had to surrender.

BM: Is there anything else that you want to talk about? I’m happy to listen, I really am happy to listen to you. I love it.

WM: Uh well, it was kind of tough to—we were there in Farragut Idaho and they discharged us by the number of points that we would earn. And so every month in the service [they] would give us one point and those of us that had been in the service longer gained more points so they were able to be discharged sooner, which was fair. But it was kind of tough to wait for the, to build up the points as the end of the war [was] closing down. Gradually they lowered the points down that you had to get discharged, and man were we ever happy to go get that discharge. They asked me if I wanted to stay in the Navy reserve and I said, “I want to get out of here. I don’t want to stay in any, have anything to do with the Navy.” But, enjoyed my stay in the Navy. I met a lot of good friends, and we had places we could go. We went into Spokane Washington, and there was Stakes there and they had activities. Well, we would meet every Saturday night. They had what they call the D&C club, Doctrine and Covenants Club they would hold it at different homes and we would go to the church and someone would take us to these homes, and we studied the Doctrine and Covenants and got acquainted with the people in the area. It was a good experience. It was three hundred miles from Farragut Idaho to Seattle Washington, and I had an uncle and aunt in Seattle that I would hitchhike over there once in a while on the weekend to see them. And when the war ended we had a 72 hour pass, a three day pass so I decided to go and I was able to, the war was over they didn’t care about the sailors I guess. The war was over, and I got about oh 90 miles out of Spokane Washington and I couldn’t get a ride into Seattle, so if I saw a car going onto Seattle I would thumb that car. There was a car coming back towards Spokane, I would walk across the street I would thumb that one. I got back to Spokane Washington before I got to Seattle. So I just went back to the base. But they didn’t want to pick up the service men, I don’t know why. The war was over, and they didn’t need us I guess. Anything else you’d like to know about?

BM: That’s about all. If you want to keep talking that’s fine, and if you don’t that’s okay too. If you want it to be done that’s fine.

WM: Well, I’ve got to tell you about one funny experience. On this Navy base in Farragut we had a lot of places where we had a medical team and a medical team in one building and there were about six boot camps there and every one of these boot camps had one of these things. There were about seven or eight of us that would go down the gym and play basketball in the evenings you know. And one night we were going back to the barracks and we would have a lot of fun. We would call a guy up and tell him we were the transfer office and his orders were in and the boys says, “hey Bill, call ol’ Skayhill and tell him his orders are in. He’s got a girlfriend in Spokane who has a little Ford Coupe, and she has a B-card which gave her more gas. I says, “Alright I’ll call him
at 11 o’clock and you guys stop him before he goes to see who’s in charge of the department there, you know. So I call down there, this corpsman answered the phone and I asked, “You got a Robert Leal Skayhill there?” He says, “Yes sir,” and I says, “His orders are in, he’s supposed to go to Pier 91 in Seattle Washington next Thursday. The office went and told the officer in charge so he called up to transfers office to see if his orders were in and no they’re not here, they’re not here. That was 11 o’clock and about 1 o’clock the phone rang down there and they said, “You got a Robert Leal Skayhill there? They says, “Yes sir,” and they says, “Well his orders are in he’s going to Pier 91 next Thursday.” And so this guy went and told Dr. Laysick, and he called up there to transfers office he says, “Have you got ordered in for a Robert Leal Skayhill?” They says, “Yes sir,” then he blew his top. He says, “I wish you guys would get on the ball. You called here at 11 o’clock and said this man’s orders are in. I called up there to verify, and they weren’t, and then you call here at 1 o’clock and his orders are in. I called up there to verify and you said yes, so something’s going wrong up there in that transfer office.” So Robert Skayhill went on to Pier 91 in Seattle.

BM: So did he ever find out it was you?

WM: Oh no, uh uh. No we had a lot of fun and those Navy officers they—the dentists, they were real good guys because they wanted to get out of the Navy just as bad as we did, and they were just civilians like we were. I had a lot of good friends and those dentists there was one LDS fellow that I went home to his home there off the base two or three times. We even went deer hunting together. But I had a lot of fun in the Navy.

ALM: You were in no danger.

WM: I was! There was an LDS nurse there, and she had a little Studebaker, wasn’t a very big car, and they called me on Sunday night, and they says, lets go to Coeur d’Alene to church, and I says, “Well, I’m supposed to be on duty.” And they says, “Oh, you can go with us. We’ll put you in the trunk.” So they pulled up behind the barracks, and I went out and crawled in the trunk. They drove through the gate, and about five miles away from the gate they stopped. I got out of the trunk, and went to church with them. When we got back within five miles of the gate they put me back in the trunk, and they took me back to my barracks.

BM: Well, that’s all I need. Thank you.