

## Recorded Interview

New Orleans 2011

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I was born in Harris, Missouri which is pretty close to the Iowa line. We moved further south near Spickard, Missouri. Later we relocated to Davis County which is Gallatin and Jamesport. Our address was Jamesport but I went to high school in Gallatin.

I was helping my Dad on the farm when the war started. We had a lot of sheep, horses, dairy cows and hogs to feed. We did not have tractors in those days, but my Dad had 12 head of big draft horses. We raised all of our own feed: corn, hay, and oats. My Dad had a lot of wheat and since we did not have combines in those days we used thrashing machines. The wheat was thrashed and stored in a big barn. Ever so often we had to take that wheat and grind it to make flour.

We had been working in the field with some neighbors the day we heard about Pearl Harbor. When we went in for dinner my mother and father were talking about the attack. The radio had reported that Pearl Harbor had been bombed and strafed. I remember that my mother turned around and said, "It will be war and you boys will have to go to war!" There were two of us at home at that time, myself and my younger brother, Calvin Coolidge. My parents didn't have a name for Calvin when he was born. An old man, Mr. Schmuck, who lived down the road, told my parents to name him after President Calvin Coolidge and they did.

I wanted to enlist in the Air Force but my Mom and Dad did not want me up in the air. Instead of enlisting, I waited and left home on December 10, 1942. I was sworn into the Army at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. We were put on a train, not sure of where we were going. When we got to Kansas City, they were under a blackout. We did not even know what a blackout meant. There was not a light anywhere. Finally, the train started moving. When we got to the edge of town, I could see the lights in the town coming on.

We arrived at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana for basic training and that was where the 103d started for me. After my parents found out I was in the infantry my mother had a fit. She wrote me a letter and said she wished she had let me go into the Air Force. I wrote back and said, "Mother, you are too late. I already have my rifle and I have my foxhole dug." My Dad did not have much to say. He dropped his head and was pretty quiet. After I left, my younger brother Calvin was sent to Japan. I thought all the time that he was a medic but I found out later that he was a cook.

I had basic training and then I was sent to mechanics school for five or six weeks. We had nineteen jeeps and a ¾ ton maintenance truck. I don't know why they picked me to go to mechanics school, unless it was because I was always tinkering with my jeep and keeping it clean. I helped the other soldiers keep their jeeps clean and make sure that they had oil. Eventually, they sent me to the motor pool. I think they sent me to the motor pool because I had experience driving a truck.

When I was in school I delivered ice to people who had ice boxes. I worked for a man who had a Chevrolet truck and I used it to make my deliveries around town and out in the country. Later on, I quit that job and went to work for a man who had a larger truck. He needed someone to pick up 10 gallon cream cans full of milk from farmers. I would pick up the cans and take them to Trenton, Missouri to a milk factory where they processed cheese as well as other products.

One day, on the way to the factory, I had a wreck. I was carrying a full load of milk and I had the cans stacked too high. I came over a hill on a gravel road and met a man in his 1/2 ton Ford pickup, driving on my side of the road. I pulled over to avoid him and my wheels got caught in a few ditches formed by the strong current of water running across the road. I turned my truck over and spilled the milk. The milk ran down the graded ditch just like the water. I had to pay for half of the milk.

When I was at Camp Claiborne I went through basic training three times, thirteen weeks every time. After the first three weeks, half of the men were shipped out and they brought in another group. I went through basic training again with that group. That group shipped out and I completed one more cycle of training with new recruits and I went with them on a train to the point of embarkation in New York. While in New York, I did get to go to one football game. I didn't care much about the ball game because it was pretty cold in December.

I made a lot of friends in basic training. One soldier's last name was Bird. He did not get around very well; he seemed older than the rest of us. One day while we were doing maneuvers I broke my wrist watch. I told this

man that I was going to the shop to see if they could fix my watch. He asked me to wait a minute and he left. He brought back a gold Elgin pocket watch and asked me to take it with me and see if they could fix it. The men in the shop said they did not have any parts for the watch and therefore could not fix it. I told Bird what they said. He told me to just pitch it over into a trash can that was nearby. I pitched it in my “pocket” and told him that was my keepsake from you. I sent it home and my mother had it fixed. I still have it today.

The men on the ship played cards and smoked cigarettes. I didn’t care for that so I would stay below. I had to stand guard duty up in the crows’ nest. We hit a bad storm and everyone was told to get off the deck. I realized that they forgot me. Water was going clear over the deck as the ship rocked back and forth. Two men finally came and got me. I went down first, followed by one of the men. The other man came up to help me down if he needed to. They held on to me and also held on to anything else they could reach.

I was sick for a period of about eight days, probably from the rocking of the ship. When I felt a little better I tried to make it to the cafeteria. I got up to go down to the cafeteria. I passed a big can of garbage at the stairs. About that time another huge wave hit and all that garbage dumped out at the stairs. I just turned around and went back to my bunk! I didn’t eat. (They warned us not to throw any food into the water because the food would attract sharks).

Most of the trip the other guys smoked cigarettes and played cards. I spent a lot of time lying in my bunk. I was given the responsibility to go up

into the crow's nest and look for enemy planes. The inside of the crow's nest appeared to be protected from the rain but I still was drenched. All I had was a pair of binoculars. I also helped the sailors clean up the ship. I thought that was pretty good. Going all this way and we had to do their work for them!

We got off the ship and walked fourteen miles to a staging area where we had to set up our pup tents. We could hardly put them up because the wind was blowing so hard. About two o'clock in the morning a guy woke up screaming, hollering and kicking. A big black snake had crawled in with him. He tore that tent all to pieces. They did not have another tent for him so he had to bunk up with someone else.

Our Company Commander was from California and his name was Capt. Dodge. We served under Lt. Shiverly and Lt. Crow. When I was in the 2nd Platoon, I served under Lt. Shirley. I understand that Lt. Crow is still living and is in Ohio. I would like him to start coming to the reunions but evidently he is not able. Pfc. Dell lives in Ohio also but cannot make it to the reunions. When we finally moved out, I drove a jeep carrying three other men. We drove single file on the east side of the road headed for the front line. When we got up to the town of St. Die we were told that the Germans were on the back side of the town setting the houses on fire. We were to attack and get them out of there. I had an M-1 rifle at first but I was given the shorter carbine rifle later. The M-1 was long and hard for me to handle. We got the Germans out of St. Die and after the war the town erected a monument to commemorate that encounter.

After we had taken the town of Schillersdorf we moved out. The weather turned very cold and some of us were directed to go back into Schillersdorf and find a place to stay for the night. Some of us went back and found a room. I was in a room with twelve other men. About two o'clock in the morning I heard burp guns going off. I woke up the sergeant next to me and he heard the guns. He moved us out quickly. Nine of the other men who had also returned were killed. A Pfc. by the name of Farber had been working in another house and he had taken newspapers and taped them over the windows. The Germans could not see the light. We eventually moved out. Combat was rough and dangerous but outside of that, we made some friends.

Before we were ready to make the last big move on March 15, 1945, we were in a big courtyard surrounded by a high fence. There was a house and barn on the premises. A French family lived there with one or two children. We were a heavy weapons company and we had 19 jeeps and a  $\frac{3}{4}$  ton maintenance truck. My job was to help the regular mechanic. Every morning I would jack up one of the jeeps, take the front wheels off, take all the parts out of the wheels, and line the wheels up. I would wash and clean the parts of the wheels and put the wheels back where they belonged. I was getting one jeep in the morning and one in the afternoon. I had been given a certain time period per jeep to finish the job.

One morning I got delayed. A Frenchman came over and led me to his barn which was full of wheat. The Germans had taken his tractor and he could not run his combine. He wanted to know if I could take one of our jeeps, jack it up, put a belt around the wheel and run it to his combine. I

asked the Company Commander what he thought. He said, "Fitz, we did not come over here to thrash wheat and combine wheat, we came over here to fight." He also said that he knew the family needed the wheat. I was given permission to help them out. About noon, the Frenchman told me to "shut it off, shut it off!" He went into the house and he told the women to fix a big meal. They sure did! We finished thrashing all of his wheat after eating.

I went back to work on my jeeps and had them ready two days ahead of time. It was about two o'clock in the morning, March 10, 1945 when the work was finished. About that time all the big artillery guns began to fire. They lined us up and we headed for the frontlines. We did not stop until we were seven miles into Italy.

We went up through Austria, made the loop and came back down through Austria. I think we crossed the corner of Belgium, but I am not sure. We went through the Brenner Pass into Innsbruck, Austria. We came out 7 miles into Italy and that is where the Seventh Army met the Fifth Army coming up out of Italy. Bob Doyle was down in that area. They told us there were 6,000 captured German soldiers, but I did not take time to count them.

They pulled us back into Innsbruck. Two days later they started to bust the 103d Division up. Some of the men, like Mel Wright, Chan Rodgers got to go to the 45th Division. A lot of men out of my company also went to the 45th. Seventeen of us were sent to the 83rd Chemical Mortar Battalion and we stayed right there in Innsbruck. They told my group we were going to train to go to Japan. I did not understand why I had to go to

Japan when I started out with the Division in Camp Claiborne, Louisiana. A lot of the replacements got to come home when they broke up the 103d.

They assigned me to drive Lieutenant Ballard and issued me another jeep. He lived in Indianapolis, Indiana and was in the 83d mortar battalion. There was an officer's club set up five miles east of Innsbruck in a little town named Steyr. Lieutenant Ballard would go down to Steyr and see a Yugoslavian girl who worked down there. She had a younger sister Maria, who was not interested in dating officers. When I would go to pickup Lieutenant Ballard and his date I would pick up the younger sister, Maria, as well and take them to Steyr. The girls' family had been killed in the Holocaust. I have some pictures of her. I used to have a pair of her earrings, but I lost one of them. The Germans had killed her mother, dad and brothers in the Holocaust.

I noticed that the farmers in that area built shelters for their cattle and attached the shelters to the rear of their houses. They wanted to hide their animals so that the Germans would not kill them. There was a trough that collected manure and urine from the cattle. The women cleaned the troughs daily. The waste was collected and used as fertilizer. I was amazed at the cleanliness of the house and the attached cow shelter.

After President Truman dropped the bombs, we did not have to go to Japan. My outfit was divided again and I went to Vienna, Austria with a Headquarters Company. On the first day of January of 1946, they told me I could go home. I remember that it was very cold. There was an American zone and a Russian zone. We were on a train on our way home and the Russians stopped the train, told us to get off and detained us. The Russians



would not let us go outside. The Americans found out where we were being held and liberated us.

I ended up in Antwerp, Belgium where I boarded the boat for home. I was in a line waiting to board and there was another line waiting to board a second boat. I just happened to spot Lloyd Shaver who was in my company. I called to him. He asked me if I was going home. I said, "I hope." That was the last I saw of him. Lloyd has passed away.

It took us fourteen days at sea before we landed in Europe. It took five days on my way back to cross the Atlantic, and land in Newark, New Jersey. After they gave us our rooms and we were settled, I called my sister in Jamesport, Missouri. I told her I was back on American soil. We filled out some more paperwork and then we were sent to other places. I went to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri to be discharged. After I was discharged they told me they were going to send some of us to Kansas City. Four or five of us chipped in and hired a taxi cab to take us to Kansas City. We spent the night there. I called my sister and told her I would arrive by bus in Gallatin, Missouri the next morning. When I got off the bus, all my folks were there to meet me. I regretted not arriving on the first ships to return to New York. I missed seeing the crowds of people waving and I missed experiencing the huge celebrations.

I got home in March but my brother did not get home until July of '45. I stayed on the farm and helped my Dad for awhile. My brother and I looked around to find something to buy hoping to go into business together. We bought a Texaco filling station and ran it for a while. We had a pretty hard time of it. We were young and the girls would not leave us

alone. One morning our Dad said, "Boys run the station and leave the girls alone." About three days later we sold the station.

I moved to Kansas City and went to work for Chevrolet in the Kansas City plant for three months. I was on the "extra board." That meant if someone wanted to use the bathroom, go to lunch, or take a day off, I would take that person's place. I went up to the office and told them I had changed jobs eight times that day. I asked if that was the only position they had for me. They said, "Yes." I had to said, "Bye, I will not be back."

It took a month, but I was hired by Sears and Roebuck Co. where my girlfriend was working. I was on the fifth floor in the hardware department. My girlfriend quit before I did and stayed home. Then I was laid off on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of February, 1957 as a result of a payroll cut. I was making \$2.12½ an hour and two young men were hired for \$1:15 an hour each. They took my job. I told them I needed that job and asked why I was laid off. They told me that I would have to chalk it up to experience. (I had previously given blood for a transfusion for my boss's mother. That made the way they treated me harder to take.) I ended up with another job at Sears, supplemented with odd jobs: cleaning yards and preparing lawns for new sod.

My next job was at a Milcrams grocery store. I assumed that I would be working in the grocery store but they put me in the liquor department. I worked in the liquor warehouse instead and it had an "old time" manual elevator. There was a place where the rider could reach through a hole, grab a rope, and lower or raise the elevator. I had a hard time getting it level and onto the floor in such a way that I could get my whiskey off. One

day I had a load of whiskey on a 4 wheeled truck. I was pulling it down an aisle in the warehouse. The cracks in the warehouse floor were very wide and I stubbed my toe down in one of the cracks. My big toe was broken so I went and had my toe treated by a doctor and then went back to work.

The post office called me and said that I should come down. That night, before I left work at Milgrams' Warehouse, I had told the supervisor that I had a job at the post office and that I would not be coming to work the next day. My supervisor at the liquor store found out that I was leaving to take a job at the post office and he really got mad. He did not have a hair on his head. I told the other workers that "cabbage head" knew I was going to another job, at the post office.

When I was laid off at Sears, my first wife and I were separated and then divorced. I met another woman who used to work at Sears; we were married for 22 years. She was not faithful and we divorced. I met my current wife on Valentine's Day. We met on a blind date and we have been married for 30 years.

My wife and I traveled back to Austria in 1992. We saw the monument in St. Die and some of the concentration camp areas. We also went into Pfaffenhoffen where we were honored with a parade. My wife worked for a toy company in Grandview, Missouri. She was able to get some American red flags and as we marched in the parade we passed them out to the kids and adults along the parade route. We really enjoyed our time there. We have been to ten reunions. I am the only veteran from my company at this reunion. Our company had the best turn out at the Dallas reunion, about twenty years ago.

Elmer Wilson, from Dexter Missouri, was in our company. I remember the day he got shot. We stuck his rifle in the ground and put his helmet on it thinking he was dead. When they picked him up they listed him as killed in action but he was not killed. They shipped him to a hospital in England where he was treated and discharged. I did not know that he made it through the war until I saw him at the reunion. I was sad that the bomb killed a lot of people in Japan. But they were responsible for killing our servicemen in Pearl Harbor.

In 1948, he went to work for Sears and later worked for the US Postal Service until he retired in 1986 to his fifteen acre farm in Raymore, MO. He has three children and they all have families. His hobby is running cattle. He is an active member of the Raymore Lions Club.

Now I am working on my high school class reunion on May 26, 2012 in Gallatin, Mo. There were 39 in my class; 21 are still living. I will send all of them a card for the May 26<sup>th</sup> reunion, if they are able to be there.