

Interviewee: Brown, Melvin
Interviewer: Stacy Tanner
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Tanner: Good afternoon, Mr. Brown. I need to ask you if we have your permission to record this interview?

Brown: Yes, you do.

Tanner: Great. First I wanted to ask you where you were born and where you grew up.

Brown: Yes, now?

Tanner: Yes, sir.

Brown: All-righty. I was born in the state of Utah, a little town near Provo called American Fork. Does it make sense to you?

Tanner: Yes, sir.

Brown: That's where I was born and grew up there, went to the public schools, and I wound up going to Utah State University. That we have something familiar. You're at Florida State, aren't you? Well, I went to Utah State University. I got my Bachelor's degree in early June of 1941.

Tanner: What were you studying there?

Brown: What was I studying? I was going to be a high school history teacher, prepared for that.

Tanner: Tell me what happened after that.

Brown: I was drafted into the United States Army just about a month after I got my degree from college.

Tanner: So about July, '41?

Brown: Fifteenth day of July, 1941, I went into the Army, drafted in. Now, that was six months before Pearl Harbor. I don't know whether you knew we had a draft going before then or not. Well, I was one of those. My tenure-to-be at that time, the draft law, was to serve as a

trainee for one year in the Army and then be in Reserve for nine more years. But when the bombs dropped at Pearl Harbor, I had my year about half done and things changed real fast when we got in the war, the United States did. I was already there when the war was declared against Germany, and I served through the whole business in the United States Army.

Tanner: When you went in, what was your training like? What kind of training did you take? I mean you went to basic training, but what was your special training?

Brown: Yes, I had to do basic training. I was sent to the East Coast at Aberdeen Proving Ground in the state of Maryland. I was inducted into the Army in Salt Lake City and went to the state of Maryland in the Army Ordnance Department. Now, that's one of the service and supply branches of the Army. I strongly suspect that I was placed there because as a recent college graduate and how I did on my exams I had to take at the induction center at Salt Lake, I think.

Tanner: So your basic training was probably about thirteen weeks or so?

Brown: Yes, it was. Then from basic training, I stayed right on the same post in Maryland, near Baltimore, and went to school, specialist school there. I went to a school to learn welding, heat treating, and tempering of metals. That's what I was doing when the bombs dropped at Pearl Harbor and we got in the war. After I had graduated from that training, they kept me there to teach that subject in their Ordnance Specialist School at the same post where I had been all the time. I did that for two years. I taught classes in that. They needed all kinds of mechanics and working people, shop people in that part of the Army. The Ordnance Department as I say, is a service and supply branch specializing in maintenance of equipment, maintaining it and storing it and keeping track of Army equipment, all the way from jeeps to the biggest cannons they had, all kinds of shells and guns, and shop work, auto mechanics, all that sort of thing. As I say, I was teaching welding, forging, heat treating, and tempering of metals. My students would leave and go out to various places all over the world. We had men placed all over the world later on to do that type of work for the Army, Navy and Marines. We had some of those in our classes, too. So that's what I did for two years.

I had been in the Army a little over a year when my wife and I got married. I met her in college in Logan, Utah. We dated for two years, then I went in the Army and we wrote for another year. She went back East to see me during the summer between her junior and senior year of college, and while she was back East, we got married. I was a corporal in the Army at the time. But she went back to Utah to finish her senior year of college while I stayed back in Maryland. After she finished her college, she went back East to be with me as long as I could stay there. But six months after she got back there, I was sent overseas. But we're still together; we've celebrated our sixtieth wedding anniversary plus. We're working on sixty-three right now.

Tanner: When is that you were sent overseas?

Brown: When I went overseas, I went to Europe, to England. One of the unusual things that I did – when I was going overseas, by then I was a staff sergeant and I had a platoon of men

under me – we were put on a Landing Ship Tank, an LST it was called, that was a slow-going ship. It was one designed to invade beaches. But they put about a hundred of us on there because it was going to England and they needed Army personnel over there. I went over as a passenger, not assigned to the ship permanently, just as a passenger.

Tanner: So you traveled across the Atlantic in an LST?

Brown: Yes, I did. We spent the month of January, 1944, going across the Atlantic Ocean from Bayonne, New Jersey, to a little fishing port in Wales. I was just looking at my discharge certificate now, and I was on it for a month. It took me that long to go across the Atlantic Ocean to get over there. I got off in Milford Haven, Wales, and I never did see it again. It did participate in the D-Day invasion, that little ship did.

Tanner: You did or the ship did?

Brown: I did not, no, no. I was in England, in the Army. They changed my specialty. I didn't teach in the shop work anymore. I was classified as a clerk – in grade – I didn't have to lose any stripes or anything. While I was overseas in Europe I did paperwork, kept records, and made reports. In England for several months, most of the time I worked on a vehicle depot, keeping records and making reports and that stuff. That's what I was doing when the D-Day invasion did take place, but I wasn't involved directly in it.

Tanner: What unit were you with?

Brown: What unit was I with over in England? Oh, I've forgotten in England, now. I've forgotten what it was. I was still in the Ordnance Department. My whole tenure in the Army was in the Ordnance Department. The only time I ever handled a gun was in basic training. But anyway, most of the time I was either instructing other people in shop work or doing office work, keeping record or making reports. We closed down our operation in England — D-Day was the 6th of June, 1944. We closed down our operation in England and went across the Channel to France in early September, 1944. I landed on one of the beaches that was invaded on D-Day, but at that time it was secure, no Germans were over in the sand dunes shooting at me. It was secure and safe then. Our little unit drove to Paris. We hit Paris just about two weeks after it had been liberated from the German occupation forces. That's about as close as I ever came to actually being involved in the war. Oh, I did see some bombing while I was in England. Yes, I saw some bombings. I entered the bomb shelter on several occasions and saw some fires started and some bombing done, but not directly at me.

We went to Paris and I helped open and operate and worked on a big supply depot in a suburb of Paris for the next fourteen months. I've often said, I couldn't have had better duty overseas during the war than to be assigned to Paris, France. Paris suffered very little physical damage to the city. Neither side bombed it very much or shot it up. Well, it was a little hairy. A fellow that slept in a bunk that was in the room down from mine, when I was working there, he turned up missing one morning. He was out on pass and they found his body in a park. He had been hit in the head with something. Murdered, I guess, by somebody and his uniform and his

identification, his dog tags, and everything was taken off the body. That was just a few weeks before what was called the Battle of the Bulge. Have you heard of that?

Tanner: Yes, sir.

Brown: In Belgium. The American authorities thought that somebody wanted his identification and his uniform for the Germans to use, which they did during the Battle of the Bulge. They had German sympathizers doing similar activity. But that's as close as I came to actually seeing loss of life.

Tanner: You were pretty lucky then!

Brown: Yes, yes, I was. He was coming home, had been out on pass, had a girlfriend in Paris, I guess, I don't know. He was coming back to the barracks. After he got off the subway station closest to our barracks there, he had to go through a park with those bushes. I think he was coming alone and he didn't make it. Somebody hit him and stripped his clothing and identification, dog tags, and everything else, left his body under a bush. Some children playing saw it there the next day and, of course, summoned the police. And that was that.

When I got to Paris, we had to be a little careful. We were told, "Don't go downtown at night. Don't walk in the shadows, particularly at night. Stay in the light." It was secure then — Germans were — other than some German sympathizers, I guess, I don't know, were active, as I just told you about. That's what I was doing when the Germans surrendered in May of 1945, and that's what I was doing when the Japanese surrendered in September of 1945. I came home in October of 1945, from overseas.

Tanner: I was going to ask you if you got to get out and see the city and stuff?

Brown: Yes, yes we could, particularly after the Germans surrendered. It was summer there; summer in Paris is beautiful. It was far enough north that the summertime hours of daylight are longer than we have here in Los Angeles, anyway. It was nice. We could go on pass. We only had to walk maybe less than a block from the gate of our depot I was working on, around one side to the other was an old medieval castle. That's where this fellow got hit that night. Get onto their public transportation system — their subway system they call the Metro in Paris, you know. We could ride all over the city, free — our uniform was our pass. Just get on it and ride and get off where we wanted to. The European war was over and there were millions of us over there, Americans, we couldn't all come home the next day after the Germans surrendered. We had work to do, kind of clean up things and square up. But we had quite a bit of time to ourselves to sightsee. I enjoyed the city of Paris quite a bit.

Tanner: Were you writing home at that time?

Brown: Yes, yes. Mrs. Brown was living here in Burbank, California, while I was over there, my wife. I was writing to her and to my mother and dad up in Utah. My younger brother

was in North Africa, in the Army. He went in about two weeks before I did. We were both drafted on that one-year's training business before the war was declared, and we both got out about the same time. Only his overseas duty was Africa, North Africa, and mine was Western Europe.

Tanner: That was a lot different experience.

Brown: Oh yes, yes.

Tanner: How did your duty change after the war ended in Europe?

Brown: Well, I still did the same thing. I was there, still there, kind of waiting around to —. As I say, we were reorganizing, we were cleaning things up, material that had been out in various locations that were coming back to the depot and being stored and ready to be salvaged or shipped home or something. We had work to do all right, but it wasn't urgent, and we could do it kind of leisurely. But I was still in the Army and had to comply with Army regulations. But being as high rank as I was, lots of times I could get a pass and go.

Tanner: You were still a staff sergeant through your tour in Europe?

Brown: Yes, yes. I was. I was discharged as a staff sergeant. I came home and Mrs. Brown was living here in Burbank. She worked at Lockheed Aircraft while I was overseas. She was not Rosie the Riveter, you've heard of that expression. I'll say she was Tessie the Typist. See, she was a college graduate, too, by then. She did office work. She worked for payroll department over here at Lockheed in Burbank here. Lockheed made many, many military planes during World War II, many of them, of all sizes, which eventually scattered all over the world. But I came back and took a thirty-day leave and went down to an Army post here in Los Angeles for my discharge. I'm looking at a copy of my discharge certificate right now. I went in the Army as a private on July 15, 1941. I came out as a staff sergeant at Fort MacArthur — that's here in the Los Angeles area — on November 24, 1945. On the line where it says length of service — four years, four months, and ten days I was in the US Army. Going in early like I did, my education that I had behind me and how I did on the tests that I did at the induction center, I was placed in one of the better positions in the Army. I saw very little hot action, let's put it that way. The only Germans I saw were the prisoners of war that served us. They did a lot of our work at the depot I was on there in Paris. They were very happy being prisoners of us. The war was over when they became prisoners — their war was over. We treated them much better than did our Allies. The English, some of them were prisoners of the French because the French Army was raised again and was back into the battle before the Germans surrendered. The fact is, legally, officially, the units of the French Army retook Paris away from the German occupation forces there. The people of Paris, we were readily accepted there. The Frenchmen treated us very well because we — they had lived, Paris had lived under — their government and their officials that ruled them were units of the German Army for four years or better. They lived under them.

Tanner: So you must have got a lot of contact then with the local people?

Brown: Yes, yes we did. In fact, in Paris we had a number of civilians working for us. I had a couple of men and two or three French women working in my department under me for what I was assigned to do and the portion I was assigned to, my job I was assigned to do, I had helpers. And some of them were French civilians. Of course, they had to do everything in English, which I was surprised that a number of French people, particularly in Paris more than smaller areas I guess, communities, could converse and do things, and write and converse in the English language rather than just the French. Many of them knew English. I asked where they learned it. "In school." They would take, I believe more of those people took English in school than were Americans who took French in school.

Tanner: Probably so.

Brown: I don't know, but I did associate with them. I didn't date any of them because I still had my good wife over back home here. We were writing to each other regularly then. About six weeks of getting over there, I couldn't write to her nor get any mail from her.

Tanner: Other than that, were you getting mail pretty regularly?

Brown: Yes, yes, the mail came through when I got in England where I was there most of the time. I was on the East coast of England up toward Scotland, but on the East coast, the vehicle depot where I worked there. After we got settled in and settled down to work, why, the mail came through pretty well, and the same when I was in Paris. I was happy for that.

Tanner: When you got back home, I know you had your bachelor's, but did you get a chance to use any of the GI Bill entitlements?

Brown: Yes, yes, I did. Yes, I did. I told you I was prepared to teach history classes. That was my studies at Utah State. I was going to teach; I had a job all lined up for me to teach in one of the nice high schools in the suburb of Salt Lake City. I was in the superintendent's office doing an interview. I was sitting on one side of his desk and he was on the other side. I was filling out papers related to the job that I would start. This was in the spring of 1941; I was still in college. I hadn't got my degree yet, but I would get it – I hoped. He asked me suddenly, "Mr. Brown, how do you stand with your draft board?" I had to answer honestly, "I'm sorry to say that I'm classified as 1-A." His reply was, "I'm sorry to hear you say it." As he reached across his desk, took the papers I was writing on, filling out blanks, took them, turned and put them in his waste basket and said, "I'm sorry to hear you say it, but I can't do business with you." I came that close to teaching at a nice high school in the Salt Lake City area, but when he found out my draft status, that was his reply. So that was that. But I decided I'd get a California teaching credential because I didn't have a home anywhere to go to. I didn't want to go back to Utah and live with my older mother and dad by then. Mrs. Brown had a job here and she had an apartment back that I could come to. We could pick up living together again. I decided I'd see about getting

a California teaching credential and teach in this state, this area. But in Utah, I had one. For my four years at Utah State, I qualified for a Utah credential. But in California, to be a full-fledged credentialed teacher, you have to have five years of college. You have to have at least a bachelor degree and then additional stuff that adds up to about another year. So I was eligible for the GI Bill, we used to call it. Remember? You've heard of it, I'm sure. So I proceeded to get things going on that and entered UCLA. That's one of the divisions of the University of California. You've heard of it probably.

Tanner: Yes, sir.

Brown: Entered there. I worked at odd jobs around LA area for a year and then went back to school on the GI Bill and got a California teaching credential. Many of the classes that I took also would help me to qualify to earn a master's degree from UCLA. But it took more. I didn't get the master's with one year, but I did get the California credential. Then got a job teaching in the public schools right here in Burbank. Burbank's a suburb, part of the L.A. area. I don't know if you're familiar with it or not. We have a lot of entertainment industry here in Burbank. Warner Brothers is here and NBC Hollywood Studios is here. Walt Disney's worldwide headquarters is right down the street from where I live here – the other side of town a little ways, but not too far. But anyway, I got a job teaching here in Burbank, but I went on, continued on to UCLA summers and part time until I did earn my master's degree in education from UCLA. I got that in the summer of 1950, I think. So I did use my GI Bill and used it to a good advantage, and I guess I still have some of it left. I don't know. Its been many years since I inquired.

Tanner: Well, that's great. You know, you've been gone for four years with the draft and with the war — how do feel that the war changed your life?

Brown: Oh, it helped me mature, I think, and work with people – a little broader understanding of people than living a rather narrow life up in a little town in Utah. I was twenty-five years old when I got my bachelor's degree. I grew up during the Depression years of the 1930s. I graduated from my high school in late May of 1934. That's been over seventy years since I graduated from high school. The Depression was still among us. We were beginning to do things to work out of it. Then it took me seven years to get in four years of college. Not that I failed classes, but when I didn't have money, I didn't go. I worked to try to get some more to go back. It took me seven years to get four years of college in at Utah State. I was no spring chicken when I graduated; I was twenty-five. My last two years there at the school was my wife's first two years. We met and dated and got along real well. We wrote to each other and wound up, as I say, another few months we will have been married sixty-three years. It matured me and I was a little broader in scope of understanding and working with people. I feel it helped me there.

Tanner: Did you feel as though you kind of lost time because you were older than a lot of the draftees?

Brown: No, I don't feel it was lost time, because it was something that had to be done.

The United States was really the only nation in the world that could lead out and do it when old Hitler and Mussolini and Tojo and those birds were riding high and swinging their weight around. There's one reason we started a draft before we got in a war, here in the United States, was to train people to prepare. Things looked bad. Japan had built big strong military forces and she moved in and had taken a big hunk of China. Things had deteriorated in relationship between Japan and us. It looked bad in that part of the world, which that's where it started as far as we were concerned, when they bombed Pearl Harbor. On the other side of the world, ole Hitler and Mussolini had teamed together. Between the two of them, World War II started in Europe on the 1st of September, 1939. That was a little over two years before Pearl Harbor, when Hitler invaded Poland. In the spring of 1940, between Hitler and Mussolini, they had control of North Africa and practically all of Western Europe. France was down the drain. Spain didn't amount to much because they just finished a civil war and they had a dictator running them. Things looked pretty tough for democracies all over the world.

Tanner: Yeah, it sure did! When you were drafted, sir, how did your family react to that? You and your brother both were drafted around the same time.

Brown: At one time our mother and dad had three sons in the Army. My older brother was there for a while, but he got a medical discharge and didn't stay but maybe six months at the most. Oh, they accepted it. I think most of the Americans did because there set little ole England out there on that island all by itself, gasping for breath, being bombed practically every night by German bombers. They weren't atom bombs, but they were German bombers, just a hop-skip-and-a-jump across the English Channel to Britain from France and Belgium. Things were pretty tough. So I think when we got in — I didn't want to go, because we were not in a war yet. I struggled through four years of college and had a job lined up to go to until the superintendent says, "I can't do business with you." I realized that things were bad and I had a low draft number. I had to register for the first draft and had a low draft number. Fact was that I was deferred for six months to finish my senior year of college as it was. I accepted it and my family did, too, I think. They realized it was something that had to be done. We didn't want to do it, but when the ball bounced our way, we received it. We picked up the ball and ran with it, let's put it that way. But for me, I was very fortunate that I didn't see any battle. I did get a few medals mostly for being there for a long time and keeping out of the guard house, overseas. I got a list here of what medals I won. American Defense Service Medal — that was because I was in before Pearl Harbor; American Campaign Medal — I don't know what that was; European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal (my part was Europe there); Good Conduct Medal with clasp (that was doing what I was supposed to do and mind our business while I was there); and what was called the Victory Medal — we all got that. I didn't get any Purple Hearts or any special citation medals.

Tanner: Well, you said you were in Paris on V-E Day. Did you get to go out and celebrate and everything?

Brown: Oh, you bet! I tried to and I did. You've heard of our Rose Parade we have here on New Year's Day. I don't know, have you ever been over there?

Tanner: I haven't been to it, but I've seen it on the television.

Brown: You've seen it on television, yeah. It's quite a party here for the LA area. The big bowl game and the parade and all, that's quite a party. I've been to a couple of them in person when I was much younger. I look at it on television, too, even though I'm only a few miles from where they're going on here. But I've seen two masses of people celebrating — one of them wasn't celebration, but they were out doing something, put it that way — two in my lifetime, and the Rose Parade here in Pasadena, California, is not one of the two. Not one of them. The first one was at Times Square, Broadway area of New York City, when the new year of 1942 came in, just about three weeks after the bombs were dropped at Pearl Harbor. We weren't in the war that long; nothing was rationed yet; everybody was still waving the flag. From where I was in Maryland there, the post I was on, about a two-hour train ride up to New York City from Baltimore. Some of my friends and I, two or three of us took a pass, which was fine, but we had to wear our uniform. About four days afterwards, we got into the war, we had to get rid of all of our civilian clothes we had on the post with us. Every time we left the post, we had to be in military uniform. So we went up to New York City to help usher in the New Year, the first one after we got in the war, a couple of weeks after, three weeks about. I'll tell you, the people, everybody in New York was out, feeling the same way I was feeling, to celebrate. This may be the last time we can. Everybody from building to building across that area; Times Square was a solid mass of people. No cars could move, just people. There were a few policeman, but they were on horseback where they would be up and deal with the crowd. They could move the horses through the crowd. Every time I turned around, wearing a uniform, somebody was offering me a drink. If I had drank half the liquor offered to me that night, I'd still been pickled, I think. That was one celebration, in a way. The second one — we weren't celebrating something good, but it was celebrating what we all knew was a change of life coming up for us. Everybody knew that. They were all out maybe doing their last celebration for a few years. Maybe it was — I don't know. The second time was V-E Day in Paris, France, on May 8, 1945. We went downtown. We got on the subway, went downtown to celebrate, the few of us. Boy, the Parisians were all out celebrating, I'll tell you that. We got off the subway in the area called Bastille and we couldn't get back on it to go on further downtown. We had to do the celebrating at Bastille area. By morning we got on the subway to go back home to our — we had a bunk to get to. Those two — Times Square in New York, at the beginning of the war, Paris, France, at the end of the European part of the war. Of course, the Japanese war was still going on. It wasn't over down there, but we weren't directly involved in that. Boy, did the people celebrate.

Tanner: Did you think you were going to get sent over to the Pacific?

Brown: Well, I was sweating it out. A few of the people in the European theater did. Their units were sent, but mine — I didn't. I was assigned to the depot, not to a unit that would be moved around as a unit. So after the Japanese surrendered, why, I didn't expect to go down there. I'm glad I didn't have to go. I've often said, when it came time for me to go overseas — and I left my wife early in the morning on Christmas Day of 1943. Couldn't have been the day after Christmas, it had to be Christmas Day. I turned the light out because it didn't get daylight until eight o'clock or something like that, and leave her at the door. That was my beginning to go

overseas. If it came time for me to go over, if old “Frankie” Roosevelt himself had called me into the Oval Office (which he didn’t, I’ll tell you that! Heavens, no!) and tell me, “Sergeant, you gotta go overseas, out of the country, but you can go anywhere we’ve got troops stationed,” — by Christmas of 1943, we had them all over the world by then except into Russia, I guess — Eastern Europe — we had them in North Africa, all down to the South Pacific. We were just loaded with them in England, preparing to put the finishes to Hitler. If I’d have had that choice, I would have chosen just exactly where they sent me, anyway, when I didn’t have a choice, and that was England. I wanted no part of the jungles and the South Pacific area if I could get out of it. If they’d have sent me, I’d have gone. I wouldn’t have argued about it, I’d have gone. Wouldn’t have gotten anywhere arguing, anyway. Overseas, that was my first choice, and I’ve often said, too, that I couldn’t have had better duty overseas during the war than to be stationed fourteen months in the suburb of Paris, France.

Tanner: Doesn’t sound like you could have been luckier!

Brown: That’s right. I recognized that, but I do believe that was one compensation for going in early like I did and my education that I had at that time.

Tanner: I just wanted to ask you one more time, if I have your permission to record this interview, sir? Do I have your permission to record the interview?

Brown: Yes, you do.

Tanner: Okay, I am going to turn the recorder off now, sir.

End