

Leroy W. Elfstrom

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Today is January 24, 1994. My name is Charles Nelson. I am a volunteer at Midway Village & Museum Center which is cooperating with the statewide effort in Rockford, Illinois to collect oral histories from Illinois citizens that participated in the momentous events surrounding World War II. We are in the office of Midway Village & Museum Center and we are talking to Mr. Leroy W. Elfstrom, 2312 20th Street, Rockford, Illinois. Mr. Elfstrom served in a branch of the United States Air Force during World War II. We are interviewing him about his experiences in that war.

NELSON: Leroy would you please start by introducing yourself to us. Please give us your full name, place and date of birth.

ELFSTROM: Okay. I'm Leroy W. Elfstrom. I was born August 14, 1922 in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

NELSON: Okay. I would like to have the names of each of your parents.

ELFSTROM: My father's name was William Carl Elfstrom. He was born in Sweden, came over here when he was 17 years of age. My mother was Gertrude Elfstrom and arrived here when she was about 2 years of age.

NELSON: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

ELFSTROM: I had 4 brothers and one sister. The sister served in the armed forces.

NELSON: Are there any details about your parents and/or your family that you would like to give?

ELFSTROM: Well, they were hard working like most parents of the time. Dad came over here by himself. It was different for him to come over without the language. Finding work to do but he did. He raised his family without any help and he did a fine job.

NELSON: What was like for you before the war and especially during 1941?

ELFSTROM: I went to school at Frederick where we moved from Minneapolis when I was 5 years old. I moved from Frederick, a small community, on a farm about 2 miles out of town. Things were rather tough at that time—depression years. We fired a wood stove. We pumped water outside for the cows. We chopped our own wood, of course. Primitive circumstances but we didn't recognize it at the time. But the school itself was great. I was able to play football, was on the debate squad, a club, played in the orchestra. I did these things that I would not have been able to do had I been in a larger school.

NELSON: What thoughts did you have about the war before the United States became directly involved in the conflict?

ELFSTROM: Actually at that time I knew of the war—I was proceeding to Chicago at the time in a car without a radio. I found out about it the next day when I got into Chicago. Prior to that time we didn't—there were no daily papers where we were. Radio received from Minneapolis and we did listen to that. Of course, we knew there was a war going on. We knew about Hitler. We knew that these countries were having problems. But it had not reached us until December 7th, '41.

NELSON: How did you hear of the December 7th, 1941, bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese? If so, where were you and what were you doing at the time? What was your reaction and the response of those around you?

ELFSTROM: On December 7th I was in route to Chicago. I was going to stay with an aunt and work in the Chicago area. I graduated from high school in May of '41. I worked at local jobs ___?___ and fireplace builder, but when cold weather came there was nothing to do. So I decided to go to Chicago. I made a plan to ___?___ was already in Chicago. Drove back with him in

a car without a radio. We stopped at Madison briefly. Nothing about the Pearl Harbor bombing. We arrived in Chicago about 2 o'clock in the morning when I found out about it from my aunt who had a son in the service in California.

NELSON Had you formed any prior opinions or developed any feelings about what was taking place in Europe or Asia?

ELFSTROM: I really hadn't. There wasn't much talk about it in the school system. I really didn't know a lot about what was going on then.

NELSON Do you recall reading newspaper accounts of German aggression in Europe?

ELFSTROM: I didn't read a lot. As I mentioned we had no local daily paper. We received the Inter-County Leader, which was a small paper that had a few things on the editorial page but not very much.

NELSON: What events led to entry in military service? Were you already in service, drafted or did you volunteer?

ELFSTROM: As I mentioned I came to Chicago in December 7 the end of 1941 the beginning of the war years. I was underage at the time but I made a special trip back to Fredrick to get recommendations from three people. So then I tried to get into the cadet program.

NELSON Was your response to entering military service influenced by family and friends attitudes towards the war or threat to national security or any other consideration?

ELFSTROM: The next day after I arrived in Chicago. I was on [79th Street East End Ave.] I walked up to 79th Street and there were blocks of people waiting to enlist in the service. There was a loud speaker with "Let's remember Pearl Harbor" already and everybody was in a highly patriotic mode. So it appears to me that the only thing a healthy person could do is join the service. That's what I did.

NELSON: What was the day of that—do you remember?

ELFSTROM: I joined the service ___?___ in 1943.

NELSON: How old were you at that time?

ELFSTROM: I was 20 years old.

NELSON: What happened after you were inducted? Where were you sent?

ELFSTROM: I was inducted here in Rockford. I happened to have a special girlfriend and I moved to Rockford from Chicago. I was drafted by the local draft board. I was sent down to St. Petersburg, Florida for basic training immediately and then later on had other training. I don't know if you want me to go into that at this time.

NELSON: What were you trained to do?

ELFSTROM: I received general tests at Camp Grant to look for something I could work at in the service. I apparently did well in code tests and memory work and that sort of thing and my aptitude was sufficient so I went into the air force. The funny part of it was, we were interviewed by a panel of officers. Of course, they asked they asked me my favorite actor and one thing after another. Then they said do you have any preference. I would like to get into the Air Force. The gentleman told me he was a colonel. He said, "You've got about as much chance as a snow ball in hell." Those were his exact words.

NELSON: what did you think about the training?

ELFSTROM: I thought the training was good. I went to radio school in Scott Field and I thought that training was very good. It was pretty good mostly by aptitude and if you did really well you a 24-hour pas. So we all worked very hard at code, theory. We had to build a transmitter and a receiver, mount it in the airplane, take off and go 10 miles away and contact the ground station. That was our graduation.

NELSON: Tell us about any other training camps you attended.

ELFSTROM: I further trained at Pensacola, Florida, and gunnery school. I trained at Scott, Camp __?__, Utah, advanced radio. Leaving Camp __?__ in the Salt Lake City area there we were assigned to a crew and I further trained, for 3 months, at Casper, Wyoming, while assigned to a crew and flying practice missions Bomber B-24 (?) liberated crew.

NELSON: Did you ever have any leaves or passes?

ELFSTROM: Please repeat.

NELSON: Did you have any leaves or passes and how did you use them?

ELFSTROM: Any leaves or passes—The one leave I remember was coming up from Pensacola, Florida, in gunnery school and being assigned to Salt Lake City, Utah, where we were to have an assigned crew. We had 10 day leave which they called at that time delay in route that allowed me and my wife to become married on January 7, 1944. I guess that's that you would call the only leave I had.

NELSON: Okay. Were there any other transfers to other units? Please give the details.

ELFSTROM: No. I don't really think I transferred. I was assigned to a crew at Salt Lake City and was trained at Casper, Wyoming. The first pilot of our crew was okay but he didn't was to fly any more so he had himself a grounded. We got another pilot, Ralph __?__, who we trained again with for about 3 months and my wife at that time came to Casper. We had a little apartment there and at the end of that period we went to Topeka, Kansas, and we were assigned as an "X" crew that meant we didn't have an airplane to fly over. We went over on the Queen Elizabeth at that time to England.

NELSON: Okay. When you were sent overseas, how did you get there? You answered that question. What were you assigned to do after you arrived?

ELFSTROM: We arrived in England __?__ September 27th, of 1944. We were put out

__?__we went on a truck, for a while on a train; got into [Tibinen] which is in the Norwich area of England about 2 o'clock in the morning. Every member of the people on the ground was up to meet us. Of course, it was blackout. The crew the group that day had gone to [Kassel] Germany and only 2 airplanes came back from that group. The rest of them were shot down—25 in 10 minutes over [Kassel]. The rest of them crashed on the way back. Two finally survived. We got together now. We're going back this September.

NELSON: What group was that? What squadron were you in?

ELFSTROM: I was in the 445th Bomber group. I was in the 703rd Bomb Squadron which, at that time, just prior to that, had been headed up by Jimmy Stewart.

NELSON: Okay. What did you think of our nation's war effort up to this point?

ELFSTROM: A little hard to say. I know we were putting a lot of effort into the war effort. I knew people were very conscientious. They'd do anything including dying for our country.

NELSON: If you did not immediately enter combat zone, where did you enter into combat?

ELFSTROM: We entered combat almost immediately. We had about a 3-day checkout, flew a few practice missions around in England but we started flying 35 missions. Think that was in early October and continued on until April of the following year.

NELSON: Do you remember what happened in your first mission?

ELFSTROM: The first mission was what we call a milk run. We saw no flack. We saw no enemy fighters, but we saw a lot of puffy white clouds below us that resembled cotton and it was absolutely a milk run. We thought, oh boy, if it's all like this we've got it made.

NELSON: Can you tell us in order the approximate member and type of casualties and

how they occurred and how they were treated, if you had only casualties?

ELFSTROM: We had numerous casualties. Sometimes we came back with casualties. More likely the airplane was shut down and we had no knowledge of what happened to them until they were declared prisoners of war or had been killed.

NELSON: Did your mental attitude change as combat continued?

ELFSTROM: I guess the longer we continued to fly the more I thought that maybe, not well, and perhaps not get back and I wrote letters to my wife on that.

NELSON: Did you receive many letters and packages from home?

ELFSTROM: I got a letter almost every day from my wife. However, they were bunched up and I received several at a time and nothing for weeks at a time. But very few parcels. When they did come, they either didn't come at all or they were badly malled.

NELSON: What did you receive?

ELFSTROM: All I got was some cookies, mostly came in crumbs; some candy. Things like that.

NELSON: Did most of the others men write and receive letters?

ELFSTROM: It depended on the individual. I went to the __?__ club almost every night and wrote letters. Some of them didn't write at all but most of the, especially those that were married, wrote home regularly, mostly every day.

NELSON: Did you forge close bonds of friendship with many of your combat companions?

ELFSTROM: I did with most of them. Our crew—we still get together with most of the crew. Some of them, I have never heard from

since we disbanded. But others are very close and I have kept in touch with them.

NELSON: During your combat duties did you ever capture any enemy prisoners and if so please describe the circumstances? This probably doesn't pertain to you.

ELFSTROM: If you want me to respond, no. We fly in an airplane and we had—we went over, completed our mission and came back. Except perhaps for sometimes seeing bombs explode in the towns and cities, I really didn't see anybody that [was] a captive.

NELSON: Prior to the end of the war, were you aware of any civilian concentration camps existed? If so please explain how you learned about them. How much you knew at that time.

ELFSTROM: I really didn't find out a lot about concentration until I got back from service. I was over there just a few months, made 35 missions and really about the only information we get came from the Stars and Stripes. So I didn't know much about that and I didn't know about concentration camps in Germany. I did, on the day we came back—we came into an area where there were German prisoners of war and of course, Camp Grant here there were thousands of German POWs. When I came back from the service.

NELSON: What was the highlight occurrence of your combat experience?

ELFSTROM: Well, I suppose for most of us, the highlight experience is that date we __?__ off the 34th mission and you had one to go after you got back. We had ups and downs; sometimes we literally dumped fairly well by dodging a target. Other days we bombed the heck out of some cornfields or woods. We always read about what we did in the Stars and Stripes. There were numerous little things and somebody having a sister or brother whom had done well. Other times pictures of the family as we sat around. Sometimes little parties and I suppose they would be the highlights although it was pretty drab living conditions at that time.

NELSON: What was your worst experience in combat?

ELFSTROM: Probably my worst experience was coming into the bomb group at night or early morning and hearing that my good friend Allen Brook from ___?___ -- was as close to anybody had been in the ___?___ -- and he was either killed or a POW. I didn't find out until a year later that he was killed on that mission.

NELSON: Tell us what you and the other men did to celebrate America's traditional family holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas.

ELFSTROM: Christmas, I remember, my first Christmas down at ___?___ field, Florida. We were suppose to fall out in class A uniform. It was raining and very cold and we wanted for dinner close to our hour. They told us to put fatigues on and go to the mess hall. We got over there soaking wet. The meal, as I recall, was good. Circumstances not so well.

NELSON: When and how did you return to the United States after the war?

ELFSTROM: At the end of the war, after I completed my 35 missions, we were assigned to fly so many missions at that time. I completed my 35 and then I was to be rotated back to the United States and go into another state of operation but which was the Pacific. I came back on a hospital ship. That's the war most of the Air Force people came back. By the time I got assigned to the hospital ship many of them were flown over from prisoner of war camps. Our prisoners—at that time there was 135 people who survived on egg nog, whiskey or brandy for 3 or 4 days. Finally they were given baby food. Their stomachs were that bad from lack of food in Germany at that time.

NELSON: What happened when you arrived in the United States?

ELFSTROM: I was given charge of about 18 GIs, like myself from Camp ___?___, New Jersey: Chicago, Fort Sheridan that were to be processed or released or whatever. I came back to Sheridan. Those 18 I was in charge of, all but 6 managed to

get off the train somewhere. I still had the records, which I turned in and they asked if you wanted to file for any disability or any thing like that or you could proceed directly home. Of course, I chose to go back to Rockford.

NELSON: First tell us about your military rank and your decorations, especially campaign decoration.

ELFSTROM: I was a Tech Sergeant, which means I had 5 stripes, radio operator mechanic, gunner and over all handyman on the crew. That means assisting the pilot with the black suits. We got 10 hours of flying to learn how to land the Liberator without the wheels up—without the wheels down. You were also first aid man and had a few other duties because the radio operator they have a gun position except in emergency.

NELSON: How about you campaign decorations?

ELFSTROM: Okay. I have the air medal with 7 clusters. I have the 3 campaign ribbons. I have the, well, a ___?___ which was awarded by the French; got one from the Belgium government but mostly air medals which was what awarded.

NELSON: Plus your good conduct medal.

ELFSTROM: Oh yeas. I did get it.

NELSON: How did you get along with the men with whom you were the greatest contact?

ELFSTROM: I got along very well. I was kind of in charge of the enlisted men and most of them were very cooperative some of them were very young. There was, however, usually on a crew, we had one maverick and I had a maverick in our crew who had to have very close supervision. We did have some problems with him but mostly it was a very new bonding experience

NELSON: Were there things you could have done differently if you could do them again?

ELFSTROM: I really don't know if I would have done anything different. I did what they told me to do pretty much. I didn't—of course, flying

was a voluntary job. You didn't have to fly. We had some in our air group who decided not to fly before they went over and they were given jobs in the PX or something and other places I had thought at that time because we had lost ___?___ training crews the night before, our pilot decided not to fly anymore. He was reassigned and we got a new pilot. I didn't sleep all that night. As you know I had married and possibly a child on the way. But I stayed with the crew. I figured this was my job and whatever it was, was what I had to do.

NELSON: What was the most difficult thing you had to do during your period of military service?

ELFSTROM: I guess the most difficult thing I had to do was my wife was expecting a child and I had to wait to find out that everything was all right. It was a cesarean operation which was not really at that time—it was not completely perfected and I didn't hear about it until several days later. I suppose at this time, waiting at that time to find out if everything was okay.

NELSON: Was there any one thing that stood out as the most successful achievement in the military service? Completing 35 missions.

ELFSTROM: Well, completing the 35 missions and again we had some real successes where we had done a great job. We had 100 missions ___?___, other achievements and awards for doing a good job. We had our citations for the group and 2nd Air Division itself having done a good job. I suppose that would be the highlight.

NELSON: How did you learn of VE Day and what was your reaction to it?

ELFSTROM: We, as I mentioned, I was assigned to a hospital ship and we had departed. All of a sudden we heard that the war was over, just after we got aboard. But shortly after we left, I think the next night, with all these explosions, I thought by golly war was over or not. Well it was determined that it was over and apparently they had found a submarine that had gotten too close and dumping that we called "ash cans" on that submarine.

NELSON: How did you learn of VJ Day and what was your reaction to that?

ELFSTROM: We had had a 5 week, what the called a recuperation furlough on Miami Beach, Florida, and when I got down there, I think I'm a little bit ahead of myself, sorry about that.

NELSON: That's okay.

ELFSTROM: We went down there and I was assigned to a B-29 Squadron in the Dakotas, I forget whether it was North or South Dakota. But in the meantime they split up the battle Germans into 3 battle zones which each give me an additional 5 points. My air medals gave me 5 points each, so I ended up with 80 points. I decided the men married with a child, doesn't have to risk (?) anymore. Besides you've been out with 2 ___?___ missions and they said the war in the Pacific would be like the European war would be like a picnic compared to what the other stuff you'd go through in Japan.

NELSON: What was your opinion of the use of the atomic bomb when it was used against Japanese civilians in August, 1945?

ELFSTROM: There again I would have misgivings. I ___?___ when we were over Europe over Germany and dropping a bombs. Of course, bombs were not perfected as they would be today and we knew a lot of civilians were killed. Nobody likes to see civilians killed. I've—I talked to German pilots on more than one occasion. They were in the service for the same reason we were; they were young men. They entered the service as 20,000 fighter pilots. They ended up with 2000. At least people didn't know what it was they were told what to do and I guess for the same reason that we were in.

NELSON: Has your opinion changed much in the past 50 years?

ELFSTROM: I have 2 sons in Vietnam in the combat area and at first I thought this is what should be done. I was in a debate squad up here at Blackhawk, we got together once a wee and we were given choices, whether pro against Vietnam. I always accepted the pros side. But as

it extended more and more and more I began to have a very sour attitude toward the Vietnam War. I could still ___?___ almost unpatriotic at the time and then I wasn't sure. That's the way it ended.

NELSON: When and where were you discharged from the service?

ELFSTROM: Yes, I got back from the European Theater for 5 weeks of recuperation and then spent some time in Miami and as I reflect, it was the end of July or August I got my discharge.

NELSON: Do you have a disability rating or pension?

ELFSTROM: I have no disability rating and I receive no pension.

NELSON: Do you have any opinions about our nation's military status and its practices?

ELFSTROM: I hear a lot of things on the radio programs and, of course, I listened to State of the Union speech last night by President Clinton. I hope and I maintain that we must have a good strong military position and I hope that is being done. Sometimes it depends on what politician you listen to.

NELSON: Do you have any contact with the Veterans' Administration?

ELFSTROM: I have no contact with the VA because, of course, I've had no disability and no reason to participate with the VA.

NELSON: You've never gone to a VA Hospital for medical services?

ELFSTROM: No, I worked at ___?___ in the civilian sector and I ___?___ had good insurance. I did get insurance for about 15 years with the government. So I never was in a Veteran's Hospital or participated anything in Veterans.

NELSON: Would you like to tell us about how your family supported you in your military life?

ELFSTROM: My family supported me with letters and encouragement and of course they had a wedding party for us during that 3-day delay in route. And we spent . . . although my parents are dead now. We've been very close to my brothers and one sister and I know what they're doing practically all the time although we were separated by about 300 miles. Use the phone and my letters, some post cards, we maintain strong family relationships. I'm very close to our—we have 2 sons; one has a PHD in philosophy but no family. My other son, Lance, works at the airport as an electronic technician, has 3 children. They have 10-year old twins and the little guy is 8 years old. We just had our 50th wedding anniversary. A little 10-year gal played the anniversary waltz for us. She's just the apple of our eye. We adore all of our grand kids.