

Elmer F. Cox
World War II
Interview Date:
Interviewer: Steven D. Decker

Int: Ok, let's start by having you state and spell your full name if you will please.

Vet: Elmer F. Cox: E L M E R F. C O X

Int: Do you currently reside here in Cedar City?

Vet: Yes.

Int: How long have you been here?

Vet: I moved here in 1946 to teach vocational agriculture in the high school.

Int: Where were you—were you drafted or did you enlist?

Vet: Well, I was going to school in Logan, and they said if we would enlist, we could finish, but with the situation as it was, that was not the case. I had to go in April of '43. I had a son that was three weeks old.

Int: So you came here after you were out.

Vet: When I got out of the military, I went back to Logan, and I didn't graduate at the time because they needed vocational ag teachers. So I applied for the job here. It was a good location for me because I grew up in Rockville, and my wife was from St. George, so we were close to both our families here in Cedar City.

Int: Which branch of service were you in?

Vet: Well, when I went in, I did quite well on codes and things, but they put me, I don't know whether it was field artillery, anyhow they trained me for radar.

Int: OK. Now is that an army unit or is it a separate unit?

Vet: Well, I'm not sure. I think it was in the field artillery. I went to Fort Douglas to take my preliminary, to get my shots and all. Then I went to Camp Wallace for Basic down there, and I was there for a while. At that time it was quite rough because I figured after maybe a few weeks, I'd be going overseas as a replacement. But I was there; I don't remember how long I was there. Then I was transferred to Fort Monmouth in New Jersey. Then I was trained in radar. This, I think they call it the 268, we called it the clothesline. It was for anti-aircraft, we were trained to track the planes as they (inaudible).

Int: You served from '43 till when?

Vet: Till '46.

Int: What was your rank?

Vet: I was a technician 4th class. I was a tech sergeant on radar.

Int: So, were you in a combat unit?

Vet: Not at the time of training. I wasn't. They transferred me around quite a bit. I went from Fort Monmouth, after I got some training there, I went to Camp Murphy, Florida, and that was quite nice, went there in October and was there until April—nice to spend the winter in Florida. I was responsible for four units, and I had good crews, I had no discipline problems, it worked out fine. Then from Murphy, I went to Camp Davis, and then went to Fort Bragg in North Carolina, and then a lot of things happened along the way. Then when we were able to get Germany back out of the air, they reduced me without prejudice. I was a buck private then. Then, they gave me a BAR, a Browning automatic, with a hundred and sixteen rounds of ammo, and then I went to Camp Shanks for just a short while, then from there overseas.

Int: To Europe?

Vet: To Europe, yes.

Int: While you were there, did you meet anybody of historical significance?

Vet: Not really, not that I recall. Our commander was Richardson, I think it was the 304th Infantry, and this was mopping up, I guess you'd call it, there in Germany. A lot of things happened before we were done. Maybe I need to go back and indicate that, like I said at the beginning, our son was three weeks old. My wife's folks thought that it would be well, and they encouraged my wife some to visit me while I was still in Basic. And then, they moved to the different places, of course off base, and then when I was able to get a pass or something, I'd get to be with them. I was with them quite a bit in Florida, and, I wasn't a brown-noser, but I feel like I did well, and so I was able to have weekend passes. That was in Florida and also in North Carolina, at Fort Bragg. And then, I had a furlough, and I brought them home to St. George. And then from there I went back (inaudible) overseas. And one of the, well, I wasn't necessarily frightened, but it was a bad day. We went from Le Havre, France, into Germany, and we crossed the Rhine River on Easter Sunday on pontoon bridges. We were in (inaudible) truck. It was, its seats in the back were along the sides, and moved up or down, down if we sat on them. This was a stormy day, the storm wasn't everywhere, but it was continual. We crossed the Rhine into Germany, and it wasn't long. We were sitting on these seats and we didn't have anything over the top. It wasn't too long till we could see a wrecked truck or tank or a dead cow with its feet in the air, and then it was quite traumatic, we saw a bunch of dead soldiers just like that—it was kind of scary—

Int: American soldiers?

Vet: No, German.

Int: Anything of a religious or a spiritual experience?

Vet: I think, I think one of the highlights of my training... See, when I went in, I didn't know whether I ever get to see my family again. And then, the homesickness set in, and I, it was really hard. I was a tough kid from the farm, so the calisthenics and the field marches were no problems for me, but I was in with some young men. I was a little older than the others, and there was a young buddy from the north that had never been away from home before, and he was just beside himself, he was so homesick, so I encouraged him to go with me to the chapel for Sunday service. It was Protestant, not necessarily LDS, and that's what I was, LDS. It was Mothers' Day, and the program was, of course, touching. We made it through, and I resolved then that I would lend a little support to his condition by being close to him. I felt that I brought him through, and by so doing that, from then on, I was able to cope with it very well. I just stayed busy and didn't spend time thinking about home and family any more than I needed to.

Int: How many grandchildren have you got?

Vet: I have 21 grandchildren.

Int: If those 21 grandchildren were sitting around you here, is there a special experience, or thought, or feeling or something like that, that you would like to convey to them?

Vet: Yes. I, well, in the first place, I would encourage them to stay close to the [LDS] church, because I felt like all the way through that my faith in my church and in my God was a mainstay for me. And I would tell them to stay close to the church and follow church leaders. I think that, well, in these days we have a hard time with religion, but my father, before he passed away, he said, "If I had one wish in this world, it would be that my children and my grandchildren would have a firm testimony of the gospel and live gospel principles." I had many companions who would say to me, "I don't understand all of your religious things," but some of them would say, "I would give anything if I could have the strength and the courage to live by my principles."

I don't know if time will permit. I had a buddy who was Jewish, and he was with me for a long time and many changes. He was not affiliated with any particular religion, but he was very frank in his discussions with me about religion. And whenever we'd move to another place, he would say, "You must be something special because you're treated like a long lost relative when you come here," and he was with me clear into the battle. After the war was over, and I was back home, he thumbed his was all the way from New York to come out here to visit with me.

And then, another instance for my grandchildren, you have to know that wherever you are, you have to live your religion. You can't be a Mormon when you're in a Mormon town and then be something else when you're out. When I was, after we landed in Le Havre, some of my buddies wanted me to go with them to visit their pastor, or Father, or whatever he was called. I said, "Sure, I'll go along," and so they made arrangements with him, and we were able to get away from town, and so we went to visit him, and we were talking, just general talking, so he said, "Hey, let me get you some coffee," and so I says, "Well, I'm a Mormon, and I live by my principles," and so he says, "Oh, yeah. I fixed you some peppermint tea." So he knew I was coming. He knew I was a Mormon. He wanted to test me first. So you have to stay true to your principles.

Int: During your time of service, did you feel supported from home, from Congress, from family?

Vet: I felt much support from my family. I have three brothers, there were four of us, and then we had a cousin whose mother died and we raised him, my family raised him, from the time he was in his early teens, so he was a brother. And all five of us were in the service at the same time. That left a real burden on my parents, but my sisters got right out and did the work on the farm to help out. My church, of course, supported us. When we went in, they gave us scriptures to take with us, and I took mine with me, and so they supported me. Even in our little town of Rockville, they had a little report they'd get out on the servicemen and it was wonderful.

I felt that, as far as political, and the leaders and the national leaders, I felt that it was necessary, and that we had a real need to defend our great country, so I didn't hesitate at all to do what I needed to do for my great country.

Int: If you watch the news lately, there seems to be a lot of debate about whether we should be in the current conflict with Iraq. What do you think about that?

Vet: I have mixed feelings. I don't think we, we haven't declared war against Iraq, our war is against the terrorists, and I think that we have to defend ourselves against terrorists. And, it's so complex over there. We have a granddaughter who served in Iraq for some time, and she indicated that the media hadn't fully given the complete picture of things. She felt like we were doing good there, and the complexity is such that you can't tell who the enemies are. You're in amongst the people, and some innocent-looking person might be really loaded with a bomb. But, I feel like President Bush is doing a good job. I feel like it's necessary for our men to be there, and I'm wondering if we're getting support from other nations as much as should be, and maybe we are. But I feel like they will eventually be a democracy and be okay, but it will take a lot of doing to get them there. And I feel a little like President Bush is getting a little extra blame for all of the things that are happening that he has no control whatever over—the typhoons and earthquakes, and all the things that are happening. But, we have to protect our rights as a nation.

Int: When you look back on your service, do you have any regrets?

Vet: No, I don't think so. I perhaps could have done more than I did. I did what I was asked to do. I tried not to volunteer for a lot of things. No, I'd do it again. I feel that proud of my great country.

Int: Is there a single positive experience that really stands out?

Vet: Well, that was a positive experience that I had with my buddy on Mothers' Day, and I'll remember that forever. There's some funny things that happened, and some of them you don't talk about. But I think the most positive thing is that you have to be positive. I think, as I reflect on things, like I said at first, I was a tough kid from the farm, and I was in with a lot of different people, and we'd take our field marches, and they had what they called the meat wagon that'd pick up the guys that couldn't make it. But lots of times I could take a ten mile hike in double time, or a fifteen mile hike in double time, the last part of it. But I think one of the positive things in my mind is, when I was in Galveston, I had a pass to go to town, and I got on the bus, and when I went to school and other times, I'd like ride on the back of the bus, so I went back there, and everybody started looking and me, and I wondered what was going on, and then I realized, or they informed me, that it was for the blacks. We had many experiences, not just there, but all through my service, that I had some black buddies who I would have trusted my life with ahead of some of the white trash that I had to be with. Like I mentioned, my best buddy all through service was a Jew, and so I—I grew up in a little town, I hadn't seen a black almost forever when I was a kid, but as I dealt with all the aspects of the service, I had no feelings that one race is superior to another. In fact, some of those blacks I loved, dearly. And another thing that impressed me a good deal as I went along was, when we went into Germany, no matter how I tried, I couldn't hate the Germans. As we'd have our chow, the little German kids would come up with a container to take what the soldiers wouldn't want, and they were clean, their hair was combed, their clothes were clean, and if they had patches, patches on patches, they were clean. And the people were clean, and I was impressed with their, you go into the German towns and their farms were right up to the road. They were clean and nice. And one of things that depressed me about as bad as anything—I love kids, and as we went in for our mop up in Germany, and we'd take the prisoners, and they'd come in with their hands on their heads, bedraggled clothes, dirty. One of the things that bothered me the very most of all was to see little teenage boys that had to be in the German service. They weren't old enough to be away from Mama yet, and there they were, and they were crying, and their clothes didn't fit good, and they were a sorry, sorry mess.

Int: When you went in, were you in the concentration camp cleanups?

Vet: Not in the cleanups. I was able to go to Aultenburg to see the cremation ovens, and to see the barracks where they lived, and to see on the walls in the basement where they would hang them, and you could see where they had clawed on the walls. It was really depressing to see.

Int: There seems to be, and this is just amazing to me that it could even happen, but there are authors out there now, sixty years later, who are saying that it never happened, that the holocaust never happened.

Vet: It happened.

Int: If you were to give advice to the men and women of the military today, what would it be?

Vet: Well, I think I'd say to them to accept it, and do the best they could, and not complain about politics or politicians, or races, or anything else. Just remember that this is the best country in the world, and we need to protect it, and it's real. You can't diminish the need for us to do what we need to, to be a democracy. There's so much now. The deterioration of the family is at such a point that it's really sad. We need to clean up the act, I guess, do things that are uplifting, protect our good country.

Int: What have we missed? What experience, what stories that we haven't brought out with specific questions? Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?

Vet: I just wanted to explain how the mopping up worked when we were there in Germany. There had been troops in before, but they had to go through the different towns. And if they resisted, then we'd do battle with them, but otherwise, we'd go on to another town that had resistance, and I remember one day we marched 26 miles, and it was in mud, we weren't on roads but just part of the way, and then when the 26 miles was up, I had to stand guard first that night. Our sergeant would put one on guard for two hours, and I would rather be on guard with someone else for four hours or even longer. Anyhow, I didn't ever have a feeling that I was going to get killed. But, you can visualize at the nighttime when you'd be out in the open, and it's dark, and your ear is just stretched to hear any little snap, or any thing that's happening, and you shiver, and it's just a terrible feeling. Well, one day we were pinned down for two solid hours. The Germans had what they called a burp gun which would shoot 640 rounds a minute, powderless shells, and we had a hard time finding where they were. This was out in an open field—it was a grain field. There were just little corrugations where they had grain. They didn't irrigate, but there might be where the rain had washed little places out. So, as we were pinned down, my Jewish buddy was on my right, just a few feet away from me, and he got shot in the elbow, it came out of his shoulder. He's the one I mentioned that thumbed all the way from New York to visit us after the war. On the other side of me, one of my other buddies, I mentioned this little ridge going down this way, he wanted to get across it, so he just stood up long enough to get across there and lay down again, and he just got riddled across his...just wiped him out, terrible. Then, it wasn't too long till the artillery came in behind us and they were able with their trajectory to find their nest and blast them out of it.

There's another funny experience that I'd like to mention here. I said I didn't like to be on guard alone, but we had billeted this one night in sort of a triangular condominium type thing, and I was on guard and so as to be out of sight, I backed up into a little

arborvitae bush. In the distance I could hear the shooting. Some of the rounds would be fire rounds that would light up the sky, and I was standing there shivering, and a big firefly flew up out of the arborvitae right by my face, and I thought I'd been had there for a minute. This was quite an experience, but we were able to clear out all the hiding places, and take care of it.

Int: Appreciate that. Anything else?

Vet: No, I think not. I appreciate the opportunity to express myself, and I'm thankful for people who will take the effort to do it.

Int: It has been a real pleasure to do it.