Adults' Childhood Narratives of World War II on the Homefront

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Don D. Elliott

Interviewee

Graham Clark

Interviewer

Interview date/location: March 7, 2018, Fort Myers, Florida

DE = Don D. Elliott

GC = Graham Clark

[Time Code 00hrs:00mins:00secs]

Graham Clark: Uh, What's your name?

Don D. Elliott: Don D. Elliott

GC: How old are you?

DE: I am 86 going on 87.

GC: What year were you born?

DE: July the 6th 1931

GC: What is your native language?

DE: English is my native language

GC: Uh, what language did you predominately speak between 1939-1945?

DE: English

GC: Uh, what part of the world, uh, country or city or town are your parents from?

DE: My mother was a buckeye from Ohio. My father was a Hoosier from Indiana.

GC: What level of education did they have?

DE: My father had a 3rd grade education; my mother had a high school completion.

GC: Senior graduate. What did they do for a living?

DE: My father was a jeweler. My mother was a housewife.

GC: How many siblings did you have?

DE: I had four, three by birth, one by adoption.

GC: Were they older or younger?

DE: The three siblings uh, that were fit girls were older. The son just turned 50. The oldest sibling is my daughter Patricia Ann Clark and she is sixty. Right?

GC: Yeah, but I'm asking about your siblings.

GC: Um, all right starting on childhood, in what part of the world did you grow up?

DE: I lived in Ohio and Indiana some of my youth prior to school age. At six years old we moved to Delray Florida and the following year we came to Fort Myers Florida where we still reside.

GC: Between 1939 and 1945 where did you live? Do you remember your address?

DE: Yes, 625 Northeast 3rd avenue, Fort Lauderdale Florida.

GC: What was your home like?

DE: Very congenial, I had a sister two years older than me that lived in Fort Lauderdale also and she was a very sweet child mate to grow up with.

GC: Do you remember your neighborhood?

DE: Very well. My next-door neighbor on the one side of me was a retired Air Force, which was part of the Army at the time I was a boy. Not the Army Air Force as it is today; it was called the Army Air Force. It is now just called the Air Force. My neighbor on the other side was a retired captain out of the Army and my neighbor across the street in front of us was a uh, man that ran a hobby house uh, cameras, all kinds of hobbies for building toy airplanes and such and uh, his name was Nasbee. Mr. Nasbee.

GC: Uh, were you in school between 1939 and 1945? During World War II?

DE: Yes sir, I was. I went through the different grades and in that period and graduated high school in 1949.

GC: What was your school like?

DE: It was a very good school. Uh, strict, required attention and uh followed the rules and uh I had planned my life to be an orthodontist and because our being in World War II, I was in my second year of Latin which was required at that time by the [00:05:00] school I had selected to go to. You had to have a college degree to write prescriptions as such and to attend their dental school. My Latin teacher called me in and because my best friend in school was Japanese, she asked me to quit associating with him and I dropped Latin, which changed my whole career plan. You didn't know that?

GC: I did not.

DE: (laughs)

GC: Uh, what did you do for fun?

DE: Uh, I called uh, having fun doing odd different things. I sold produce door-to-door. I sold magazines door-to-door. I delivered newspapers on a route and eventually I worked for Western Union and routed telegrams from the desk and delivered them. (Clears throat) I started to work at Woolworth Company as a stock boy at age 16 and worked for them 28 years.

GC: What year was that?

DE: That was October 27th 1947.

GC: 1947, Uh, Do you remember uh, where you liked to go? Uh between 1945 and early high school?

DE: Well we went to Ohio almost every summer and I worked on a farm. I worked on a fruit farm for a man named Groby. He had peaches and apples, raspberries, cranberries, grapes, and all kinds of produce: tomatoes, cucumbers, cantaloupes, uh, sweet corn, many different, He farmed over 600 acres and kind of used me as general flunky in all areas.

GC: Uh, between 1939 and 1945 were you aware of the war?

DE: Yes, very much so. I was on A-1A December the 7th, which was Sunday. After church going to Delray to my brothers and we were going to have a picnic and the car I was riding in was a Chrysler. I turned on the radio and off came the announcement: Pearl Harbor has been bombed and my Father made the statement, well Eugene will be gone in three weeks. That was my half-brother and He was in the Navy Reserve and had been through basic training and accomplished all that but was just a seaman then. They did activate him, three weeks later only it was one day past what Pop said, it was on Monday, they didn't take men on Sunday, it was the only way He missed it. (laughs) And he served as a Chief Petty Officer in the CB's Branch of the Navy, in the Pacific, building landing strips for wounded planes, eventually, that were shot at and hit and had to be landed on sabotaged islands or on, I should say, islands that were camouflaged. They had food and water there, Eugene said, and (coughs) all transmissions that he made, be it writing or anything, he could not tell his location for fear that the enemy would find out where we had locations in the Pacific.

GC: Was that your earliest memory of World War II, was hearing about Pearl Harbor?

DE: Well, I had other memories about it, eventually I had the Miami News distributorship at the Naval Air Base at Fort Lauderdale where the Grumman TBF was pilots were in training, that was a torpedo bombing uh, plane that could bomb in the ocean uh German ships and they trained the pilots there. There was some of them that left that base on training that never came back and they were lost in the Bermuda triangle and never heard from. That went down [00:10:00] in history.

GC: Um, How did World War II, like, affect your life, like, family, school, friends, neighbors?

DE: We went, came under gas rationing, uh, you couldn't go much, I think we got three gallons a week and that was supposed to be enough to take you to the grocery and to church and uh, that basically covered most cars burning sixteen to eighteen mile to the gallon gas ration.

GC: Did, do you remember hearing stories? Like any adults telling stories while you were younger about the war?

DE: Not many there was, once in service they were kept in service till the war was over. I did hear some stories about the different uh, things that went on. I had a cousin that landed at Normandy uh, on the invasion of Europe when World War II was proceeding and He went all the

way through to the Battle of the Bulge and He was killed in Action there. He had been rotated from the Pacific, he was at Pearl Harbor the Sunday it was bombed but was not injured in anyway but he was killed in the Battle of the Bulge. His name was Charles LeFever and he was quite a first cousin.

GC: Um, like, as an adult what particular stories of World War II have you told, like, about—

DE: Basically what I just told Graham in this interview because uh, that's been a long time ago.

(Both laugh)

DE: Since the, since the, war was over and uh, you could hear some, sometimes, there were newspapers out that would tell the different uh, countries that our troops were in and where they were advancing to and how successful they were and their attack on the enemy, that had been our enemy, since '41 when they declared war shortly after Pearl Harbor. President Roosevelt, our President at that time, declared war on both Europe and later on Japan, or Japan first I believe, I can't remember which was first, but they were close together.

GC: Um, do you want to expand on your friend that was Japanese?

DE: He and his Father came to the United States with the um, (coughs) railroad building in Florida and Henry Flagler who was the builder of the Florida East Coast Railroad imported Japanese people to work as laborers and eventually when the railroad was completed he gave them land between Delray and Boca Raton and it was called Yāmato and His father was the mayor of Yāmato, now they refer to it as Yámato but it was spelled that way so we picked up that but he grew up part of the time at Yamato and uh, he spoke fluent Japanese as well as his brother who was in the US Army, most of the people from Yamato were confiscated and shipped by railcar to concentration camps in California. His family, because his brother was in the US Army and was pulled out of the mil— medical corps was put in the Pacific to listen in on all the Japanese broadcast that went out to their ships and all and thereby our military was informed of locations and things that gave us an edge on crippling their Navy and uh, he had stories to tell but they were all to be confiscated or blanked [00:15:00] out and not told until the war was over.

GC: Do you remember what year they were sent to the, uh, concentration camps?

DE: I do not. I really can't remember that but we had very few and they built a big, big airbase there called Boca Raton Airbase and eventually that was the known before World War II as the Pineapple capital of Florida and that was their main crop after they were dismissed by Henry Flagler and given the land and Florida grew the best pineapples you'd ever want to eat (Graham laughs) not comparable to any we import today from— they're picked so green these were picked almost ripe and full of sugar.

GC: Uh, do you remember how you felt when your friend was forced to move away?

DE: Uh, He eventually moved to Fort Lauderdale and that's how we became friends because of the War, they confiscated the land where they had lived and his father took up landscape and uh,

manicuring fine homes in the islands off of Fort Lauderdale off of Los Olas Blvd. and uh, he maintained them for public people who lived on those nice homes.

GC: um, other than the changing from the orthopedic, how did, like, World War II affect your life, in any way?

DE: Well, I worked as a stock boy for Woolworth and eventually I went through the training program and became a store manager of the Woolworth store, my first being WestPoint Mississippi and I got it on my 21st birthday and I was the youngest manager in the company, at that time.

GC: Can you think of anything else?

DE: Well, I went on with Woolworth and worked for them 28 years before they went out of business running ten Woolworth stores, two Woolcos and serving in different capacities above that.

GC: During, from 1939 to 1945 like World War II can you think of any other notable thing, you know, memory or event that you remember?

DE: The only thing was the word, when the word came that my cousin had been killed in the Battle of the Bulge, He was much older than me but he just a jolly good, natured, handsome man and I kind of looked up to him because of all the humor he had and the things that he did. One of the things that I remember about him was He and the boys he run with went to a farm in the community of my grandfather, in fact across the road from my grandfather's farm and took a wagon that was used to haul crops in: wheat, oats, hay and such and took the wheels off at Halloween night and put it up on the roof of her barn, Zella Swaggert, was her name and put the wheels back on, on the gable of the barn and when she arose on Halloween morning there was her wagon up on the barn. They eventually took it down but they had a lot of fun out of it and they were great to tease her because she was a maiden, unmarried woman and yet she was the farmer and she hired these young boys to do help for her such as help get the hay and oats, wheat and stuff in, crops for her.

GC: How old were you when this happened? Do you remember?

DE: I sure don't. I was probably seventeen somewhere around there.

GC: So it was probably during the war, so it was before he shipped out?

DE: No it was, well, they did it during the war, before Charles went in, he wouldn't have been eighteen.

GC: Charles was your cousin?

DE: [00:20:00] Uh-huh.

GC: Uh, is he the only family member or cousin, or friend you know that went off to fight?

DE: No, there was quite a few on both my daddy's side and my mother's side, Charles being on my mother's side. Her father and Charles' father were brothers; he was a first cousin to my mother.

GC: So do you know— thank you for letting me interview you and contributing to the historical record.

DE: I hope it was satisfactory.

GC: Yeah, it was good.

(Beginning of File STE-007)

DE: Cause the German boats were uh—

GC: SO you remembered something else about the headlights?

DE: Yeah, during World War II we had to have the headlights of the cars all had to have a half aluminum cover over the headlights so that the lights would not shine if they were not on the beach road out over the ocean uh, so the German subs that came out over the coast of Florida would not uh, try to shoot in, into Florida because we used many of the hotels on the beach for uh, training basis for Navy, Air Force, Army, uh, especially when we uh, radar schools and such as that on the beach training our military men and uh our bases were basically shut down because the hotel traffic didn't get to take and use 'em. In fact the only way you could travel, because of gas rationing, was by rail or bus uh, greyhound or trailways or Florida East Coast Railroad or Seaboard railroad to get to Florida.

GC: What about the U-Boats? You remember seeing them, right?

DE: Uh, no but they had U-Boats come into Daytona with German that the sailors all spoke fluent English and they were dressed in civilian clothes and our government picked them up someway that they were in this, I don't know, tavern, bar or whatever and blockaded them and very few were left on the boat our in the ocean and they had come in by small boats to get on shore. (Both laugh) To get a drink.

GC: So just park the U-Boat and ride in.

DE: Yeah, I guess and drop anchor.

GC: Do you remember when?

DE: No, I don't but it made the headlines.

GC: What grade you were in?

DE: I don't remember that, I sure don't. But it made the news.

GC: Yeah.

DE: We had U-Boats drive boats into Port Everglades, Port Everglades off of Fort Lauderdale had a cable system that went all across the entrance to the port and they closed the port when our ships weren't coming in to keep the enemy subs from slipping in and sinking our ships in the harbor. Some of those things were very interesting uh, that our people were as intelligent to plan such. These could be opened without physical personnel being there present. They were operated electrically.

GC: Do you remember any notable newspaper? You know, articles and newspapers during the War? Anything?

DE: They kept us up pretty good, um, we had the Miami Herald, we had the Miami news, we had a paper there in Fort Lauderdale and most of 'em repeated each other. (Graham laughs) Just as they do today. But it was a time of, of secrecy to the American public and yet some uh, publicity on the war and (coughs) it seemed like [00:25:00] other than the invasion in Africa by Rommel, the German leader and his tanks moved very fastly across Africa but eventually they were driven out of Africa and then we uh went up through Italy, Sicily and Italy and moved those German troops out of that area and this high school buddy of mine parents had brought him up in a place called Bassano del Grappa and uh, he was born and raised there and uh he uh went to school there and eventually, after being held there for a long time, his father went in through Switzerland and got him out of there into Switzerland and they got to the United States and then He was drafted in the Army (Graham laughs), same as I was and he was trained to be a butcher and in the Army they made him the baker for our company and battalion and he baked great pastries.

GC: Do you remember any other, other than the headlights and the rationing, do you remember any other effects the war had on your, you know, daily normal life?

DE: Some things were rationed, food rationed: sugar, flour, things like that were not in plentiful supply because so much of the Agricultural area was used to uh, produce things that were more beneficial to the war. My father was called in to serve in a place, in Indianapolis, Indiana called Lukas-Harold and there they developed the Norden Bombsight that was on the B-25 and Father only had a 3rd grade education but he was a brilliant man and retired before he was forty years old as a Jeweler, he had five Jewelry stores when he retired, very successful.

GC: Were you in Fort Lauderdale when he had to go back to Indiana, or?

DE: Yes, I was in Fort Lauderdale all the time during school year. Now, I would go back up to Ohio in the summer and work on the farm.

GC: So it was the summer when he worked on the uh, plane or the—

DE: No, he worked three months—

GC: of the year?

DE: up there as a uh, at Norden bombsight plant. At such time as it was put into mass production or production there uh, then he was released by the government. But he was there twenty four hours a day, not allowed to write anything that wasn't censored or call anything out that

somebody wasn't there monitoring the phone calls. No payphones or anything like that was available to him. Their clothing was sent out and their food was supplied. Any clothing they had that had to be washed was washed and brought back to Lucas-Harold.

GC: um.

DE: They were just like prisoners, really.

GC: What grade were you in when this— when he was working on that?

DE: Let me think. I was in the sixth and seventh grade.

GC: So that was before the war?

DE: No, I was, I was, let's see I was— thirty-one I was born and I was in the sixth grade— that would have made me—

GC: You were younger in the war, then.

DE: Yes.

GC: You weren't—

DE: I was really young when it started in 1941, I was ten years old.

GC: Do you remember what you did for fun when you were ten around? I asked you that before but you were talking about high school, I think.

DE: Um, really for fun uh, we had a park about four blocks from where I lived and a lot of times we'd go over there and we had swings and slides and all the things that parks have and we enjoyed that and um, we got to um, see [00:25:00] high school football and basketball and stuff like that and that was quite fun to watch the big boys and later um, participate in sports also. That's more.