

Interview with Mr. Buford Brodbeck

Veteran World War II

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Narrator: Today is March 2, 2005. This is the beginning of an interview with Buford Brodbeck at the United Methodist Church in Kinsley, Kansas. Mr. Brodbeck is 79 years old. My name is Kevin Proberts, and I will be interviewing him along with Nelda Flores. Mr. Brodbeck served in the Air Force during World War II, was ranked as private first class.

Narrator: Were you drafted or did you enlist?

Brodbeck: I was drafted and was living in Kinsley. Well, we were drafted. You didn't have much choice. You got your diploma in May and then the next day you usually got your draft notice.

Narrator: Would you have enlisted without being drafted?

Brodbeck: Oh, yes. I was a sophomore when they bombed Pearl Harbor. A bunch of us knew we were going to sign up right away. But you had to be 18 to be drafted, and of course my parents said, "No way, you're not going." But we did have a few in my class who did volunteer, that got their parent's permission.

Narrator: Did you choose the military branch you wanted to serve in?

Brodbeck: Well, it was kind of funny. You get a bunch of kids about 18 years old, and I don't know how old you are. You are about the same age. They sent us to Leavenworth, and we get down there for our induction and stuff. The next thing we know they tell us that if you're going to take the Army, you got a three-week furlough until they want you back in the service. In the Navy you got two weeks, and in the Marines you got one week. Well, anyway you know how I ended up. We took a bunch of tests and classifications. I just figured I would go to the infantry. Next thing I knew someone announced my name and said I was in the ASPP program. What was that? Nobody knew what that was. I finally found out I was going to the Air Force in pilot training, but I wouldn't make it through pilot training. At that time you had your choice. They had a bunch of them come in there at Leavenworth. The Marines needed so many. Sometimes they'd just put you in the Marines. If the Navy needed you, they'd put you in the Navy. But when I went through, they did give you a choice.

Narrator: What was your specialty training in boot camp?

Brodbeck: I first went to Sheppard Field, Texas where I took basic training. It was maybe a couple of months down there. Basic training in the Air Force at that time wasn't like what the other guys were taking. We were going to be trained to be pilots or something else in the Air Force. They were going to the front lines or something like that. I chose to try to be a pilot, a fighter pilot, or a bomber jockey, or something like that. During basic training down there we had to go before a board of review twice every week where we got to meet with a bunch of officers . . . like you two are quizzing me about what you are going to do and all this stuff. They were tough. That part was the strictest; the other training wasn't. Of course, we had to do those little drills and obstacle courses, shooting, and stuff like that. One time they asked me a question and it didn't hit me right and I just told him to go to _____. I really regret it now.

One of the majors on the board came up to talk to me. I don't like to brag, but I was a pretty good student and kind of a leader in school. They were looking for that kind of people, but what I do regret is that he wanted me to go back and apologize for what I got mad at. I wouldn't do it, I could have, but I do regret it. At that time, when you were going into pilot training you went into college for a couple of years. You had to get two years of college before they would even start training you as a pilot. I look back and think that is something that I didn't want to do. But anyway, after they washed me out of pilot training they gave us some options of what we wanted to go into. I thought, well I could be a gunner on a bomber, would still get to fly. I volunteered for that. My second choice was for armor. They are the ones who put the bombs into the planes, the arms, and all of the machine guns. Lo and behold, I ended up going to Lincoln, Nebraska to a mechanical school to be a mechanic on an airplane. I go up to Lincoln, Nebraska, and I was supposed to go to a nine-month school to be trained to be a mechanic as a crew chief on a fighter plane. They escalated it because they needed crews. They made us start going from eight hours a day to ten hours a day of school. That was tough. After I graduated from there I was sent to Niagara Falls, New York to a little school up there in Bell Aircraft Factory to be trained as a specialist on the B39 fighter plane, a plane that no one had heard about. By the time I got out of that, they were about to get obsolete. Then I was sent to McDill Field in Florida. I worked on B17's and B29's, never touched the fighter planes. They trained me for about a year to be a mechanic on a fighter plane but it. . . .

I spent all of my time in the States. I tried to volunteer different times to go overseas but got turned down every time. Finally, I realized and asked my CO, "Why am I getting turned down?" He said, "Do you have any brothers who are overseas?" I said, "Yes, I have three." He said, "That's why." So I just gave up.

But I look back at it, I was a young kid then, 18 years old, inexperienced; you don't know what was going to happen to you. I almost decided to stay in after I got enough points to get discharged; I changed my mind. It's something that I look back on. I don't know if I recommend kids going into the service. But right now it looks like a pretty good deal sometimes; you get your college off of it pretty good now.

Narrator: How have the changes in technology affected the current military?

Brodbeck: It's just a different world now.

Narrator: How does it compare with when you served?

Brodbeck: World War II. We were all mad at the Japs and the Germans, and we hated them. We were sitting over there doing nothing; they bombed Pearl Harbor so we went after them.

Narrator: Did you see any combat?

Brodbeck: No combat. I never did go. It took training for these pilots and crews to do their flying. Somebody had to do it, and when you got picked, that is what you did.

Narrator: Did you receive any medals?

Brodbeck: Oh, nothing . . . on the list . . . got the Good Conduct Medal . . . different medals . . . not concerned about medals when you're fighting a battle.

Narrator: Do you keep in contact with friends made during your military service?

Brodbeck: I did for a while but eventually I've lost them, lost contact with them. I had a real good friend from someplace in Missouri; I forgot the name of the town. We were in the same barracks, slept side by side. Every place we went, he was with me. In fact, he came back out here after we got discharged, worked with me in the carnival business there for I hired him before I went into the dry cleaning business. I remember the guy. He was quite a character in the barracks. I had somebody look him up on the Internet and found him. He lived in Wellsford, Kansas and was the postmaster there. One time when my family was in Olathe, I called him up. I've never been over to visit with him. Every time I'd plan to get down there we're always doing something else. I've tried to contact some of the others, and I was pretty close to it, but sometimes it's hard to find them.

Narrator: What did you do for entertainment in the service?

Narrator: We'd maybe go and swap a few root beers (laughter), and on the base we had a movie theater. They had an outdoor theater there, would bring in shows, USO shows. Most of the places were in the area. When I was in, you could get off the base except when you were in school, but maybe on the weekends. When I was on base for those two years that I was in Florida, I actually lived off the base with my wife and drove back and forth like a job. I drove back and forth anytime. We would get Sundays off. We drove six days a week usually three different shifts, and then changed every two weeks, worked from 7 until 11, then 11 until 3, and 3 to 11. We were out on the flight line, maybe training these crews 24 hours a day. We had to keep the planes ready for them to get up and go.

Narrator: Were you ever scared, like today's my day, and I'm going over there?

Brodbeck: Oh yes, I was ready; I wanted to go. In fact, I volunteered once. On the B29 they had what they called a flight engineer besides the pilot, the co-pilot, the radio guys, and the bombardier. They were awfully short of guys, so they put on the bulletin board that if you wanted to go and take the two weeks' training, they would commission you as a second lieutenant and you would be the flight engineer. What he did was sit there and look at all the gauges and tell the pilot if everything was running all right. I got turned down on that. I thought that I was going to be a second lieutenant and get to go overseas. You did feel . . . I did. You felt you weren't doing enough for the war effort, but I look back and think about how many crews I probably helped train in the few years down there. Maybe I did do some good.

Narrator: After the military did you return to school?

Brodbeck: No. When I got back out of the service. . . I don't know whether you two have heard the story, but I used to be in the carnival business for years. My mother was running it by herself, and I felt I ought to go and help her as much as I could. So I got into that business for a while until I got tired of that. Then I bought the cleaning shop in 1949; I ran that for 54 years.

Narrator: Has your group had reunions periodically?

Brodbeck: No. Most outfits have reunions, but ours was kind of . . . they didn't stay together . . . some would go out on a flight by themselves . . . some would go overseas. We had guys coming from school there, and we never were that . . . oh, once in a while we would have a group picnic on the beach down there.

Narrator: Do you feel bad about not going overseas?

Brodbeck: I did, yes. I mean, the only excursion I actually did, that I could say that I went overseas was on a fun trip. After the war was over in Europe and instead of flying those B29s there at Tampa, they had nothing for them to do. So every weekend they scheduled to fly of a B29 to take a bunch of people down to Havana, Cuba for a weekend. That was tough duty down there. If you're considered a crew chief . . . I was the head of maintenance on that plane, and if your plane got picked to go down there, you got to go along and spend three days down in Havana, Cuba. That actually could be considered that I did go overseas, but I never did claim it.

Narrator: You said you could go back and forth to see your wife. Were you married before the war?

Brodbeck: My wife and I married while we were seniors in high school. She was pretty well broke up when I first went in, but it wasn't long. I finally got stationed down there in Tampa after I left Niagara Falls in May 1944. She lived down there most of the time with me. About every time she would get down there with me I would get a notice that they were going to send me overseas. She would pack up and go home and then come back again. But that was quite an experience.

Two different times we lived with another couple, and one couple wasn't very nice. We lived with another couple from Michigan, and I spent about two years trying to teach him how to . . . he was originally from Maine. I kept telling him in two years I'm going to teach him how to speak the United States. I don't know if you have ever heard of someone with a Maine brogue. It is something else. It is worse than the Southern brogue.

Narrator: You mentioned you had three brothers overseas. What happened to them?

Brodbeck: They made it through. Two are still remaining. My oldest brother died about ten years ago. I've got twin brothers. I'm not a twin, but I have twin brothers. In fact, I like to tell the story. When we were young, you know junior high and younger than that, my mother would dress us the same and we kind of posed as triplets. We got a lot of free movie passes and milkshakes in drug stores when we were traveling around in the carnival. They would ask us if we were triplets. We didn't say no; we didn't say yes. But I grew much bigger than them; I was the youngest of the family.

Narrator: You were a mechanic and a pilot?

Brodbeck: No, I was not a pilot, just a mechanic. I did fly quite a bit on the training missions; any time that I wanted to they would, if I had a parachute out there. Sometimes the crew would bring me one . . . sometimes from the crews in the barracks, on trailers, then the crew would have a parachute along. I flew quite a bit, gained quite a bit of experience. The only bad part of it was when they brought the B29 down. It was probably one of the greatest airplanes ever built, but it wasn't quite ready to be flying at the time. It needed a little more work on it. We were having a lot of trouble with it. The engines would be going out on take-offs and crashing down there. They were trying to blame it on the ground crew. We kept telling them that we're doing what we're supposed to do. Then they finally figured out that they had engine trouble and oil trouble. There for a while they brought a chute out every time that a gunman came. They made you go along, 'cause they thought that would make sure that you're working on the plane like that. It was a little scary sometimes. But they finally got the plane able to go . . . it was a pretty good plane.

Narrator: Did you keep a diary or journal?

Brodbeck: No, I didn't.

Narrator: Have you visited again any of your military places?

Brodbeck: No. This fall, I had a grandson getting married in Pensacola . . . in October, and my plans were to take an extra day and go down to Tampa just to look at the place again. Somebody told me that I would never get on the base. It's a high security base now, the B52 bomber base, the headquarters for the Third Air Force abroad. But I contacted them down there and they said yes, I could come down. I carried it for years. They give you a pass that you could get onto a base after you got out of the service. They said all I would have to do was have my driver's license and the title of my vehicle as I would have rented a car. The distance was too far, and time was getting away, and the wedding and all of that stuff. I just didn't do it. I kind of regret it. No, I've never been to any of them, is a pretty good distance. One that I would like to visit again is Niagara Falls. That was kind of a treat to be stationed there. The base had only about 100 people on it all together, was run by Bell Aircraft Corporation. The people treated us like we were war heroes from a little town. They were always wanting to buy you a drink or come to their house for dinner. It was such a great place to be. It was a nice area. We could sit there and watch the water go over those falls. We were just fascinated by it all.

Narrator: How long were you in the service?

Brodbeck: Two and one half years.

Narrator: What did you observe of the public response to the military personnel?

Brodbeck: I think that they treated us good. At Tampa there were places that weren't receptive to us. You could look at the bulletin board at the base there at Niagara Falls, all kinds of places, cards up there, people wanting you to come to dinner. We didn't know them from nothing. I don't know how many times I went. One time I went to a Polish wedding. That was quite a thing; they really had quite a party, I tell you.

Narrator: What was your most memorable experience?

Brodbeck: Standing outside by my plane, I looked across the way and there was another B17 sitting over there. They were starting the engines up. When they started the engines up, the ground crew men . . . they were supposed to start one engine at a time. It had four engines on it. When you are starting the engines up, you always have a ground crew man with extinguishers in case the engine caught on fire. It could happen real easily with oil backed up in the supercharger and exhaust system. This poor fellow didn't realize it, but he backed into one of the other engines that was running quite a distance, splitting him right down the middle.

Narrator: Do you have other thoughts to share with us.

Brodbeck: You get me talking and sometimes I never shut up. I think some kids getting out of high school right now are uncertain about what they are going to do. I think it is a good thing to go into the service. They really don't want to have to go to Iraq but somebody's got to do it, I guess. It doesn't take long to get there.

Narrator: Has your definition of patriotism changed?

Brodbeck: Nope! I put my flag up before I came down here. I still feel patriotic as hell. That flag means a lot to me. Sometimes I think the public is a little shy about the flag, but after 9/11 it's come around. People are more patriotic.

Narrator: If you could would you go to Iraq right now?

Brodbeck: You know, I have thought about that when they were calling up . . . you all know that I'm fire chief too, and they were asking some of the old veterans that majored in the fire service during World War II. My wife would kill me if I did; I did have the thought. They would probably look at my age. I have had dreams that I have been called back into the service. At my age, I think, what are they . . . I dreamed this.

Narrator: If you were able to go over, would you.

Brodbeck: Why, sure.

Narrator: You wouldn't be hesitant about it?

Brodbeck: Nope.

Narrator: Because of your strong commitment to the American values/

Brodbeck: Right.

Narrator: Did you see any discrimination during your time of war?

Brodbeck: When the Japs bombed Pearl Harbor, everybody was mad. I mean, I tried to volunteer but my folks said, "You're not going to. You're going to finish high school." You couldn't volunteer unless you were 18 or with your folks' permission. A few in my class volunteered when they were seniors. We graduated a little later in the year , , , in fact, I was in the first class to graduate from the high school over here when we went the second semester after the other one burned. We usually graduated a little later in May. You guys graduate a little early . . . the next day after graduation I got my draft papers. So you didn't have much time to think about anything. You knew that you were going to go. Well, everybody knew. If they could pass the physical, they were going into the service. The draft is just that way.

Narrator: Was there much involved with passing the physical?

Brodbeck: (Laughs) Not too much. You had to be in pretty bad shape to not go. If you had four flat feet, they wouldn't take you. You could have two flat feet but not four.

Narrator: What were your experiences with troop trains?

Brodbeck: That is really something. I forgot about that. When we left Leavenworth, but before I get to that, I have one story that I want to relate to these young kids. When I got inducted to go to Leavenworth to go into active service, we were all 18, maybe one or two guys a little older, some in their 30's. Well, anyway, when we left here on the train they appointed one person to be in charge of the troops. We had vouchers for tickets and meals and stuff. For some reason, the draft board picked me to be it. We get into Kansas City, and there were some kids there that had never been out of the county. Now I know that it's hard for you people to realize it. They had not been out of Edwards County in their lifetime, and here they were going into the service. I had been out on the carnival and I had learned to take care of myself. These three boys back there just cried . . . I mean they were so homesick. When we got into Kansas City, we had to wait for a train to go to Fort Leavenworth, and somebody said, "Where are we going to eat? Are you going to take us to eat?"

I said, “Well, I can remember my folks taking me uptown there where they had a nice cafeteria, good food, you know.” They said, “How far is it?” I said, “Oh, just a few blocks up there.” So I had them out there marching . . . being soldiers at 18. I think it was almost a mile and a half to town.

Now concerning the troop trains, that was something else. When we left to go from Kansas City to Wichita Falls, Texas we went on a troop train. Some of those old cars that we were riding on must have been built back in World War I or something. When we left, we went south down into Arkansas and got down into the Dallas-Fort Worth area, and then they put us on another that stopped in Denton, Texas. Most of the time you would think that the troop trains would have priority, but they didn’t. You had to maybe sit on a siding sometimes for an hour while the other trains went by. They wouldn’t let you off the train. Sometimes they would though to stretch a little bit, but anyway, it was the middle of August that we were going down there, hot out there waiting. I don’t suppose any of you guys have seen the old trains with the smokestacks and the smoke coming out of them. Well, it got so warm in those cars. We couldn’t get the windows opened as they were all jammed. So someone decided to break a few out so we could get some air in there. Well, that was fine; we got some air. But when we got to going again, all of the smoke came right in the windows, and those cinders. We looked like a bunch of colored people coming into our station.

One time I was sent out from Florida up to Texas to attend a special school on engines. Coming back, they booked me . . . I had a Pullman, a place to sleep. Well, anyway, from Kansas City to Tampa it took me about a day and a half to go, rather slow, on a regular train.

Narrator: What is your opinion about reinstating the draft today?

Brodbeck: I kind of hate to see them do it as long as they are getting enough volunteers. I really do. From reading in the paper, it sounds like they’re doing all right. There’s quite an incentive, you know. You get better pay. When I went in as a private first class, we got \$20 a month. Of course, that was 1943 and that’s more than \$20 now, but that still wasn’t very much. The only thing that I was really mad about when I was in the service . . . the reason I went into the Air Force was, as I already said, I wanted to be a pilot. And ranking, you could get bumped up in ranking when they sent me to school in Lincoln, Nebraska. After nine months of school but they shortened it to seven I was supposed to be automatically ranked as a buck sergeant, which is a three-striped sergeant. Well, for some reason, the Air Force ran out of ranking. They wouldn’t give you any, and then I went on to that special school in Niagara Falls, and I was supposed to come out of that as a staff sergeant. That was one rocker out of the way. I didn’t get that. And I served as a crew chief, as a BFC on the 17 and 29, what they called tech orders. You had to be at least a master sergeant . . . I mean a staff sergeant or above, and I never did get any full ranking. It kind of irritated me . . . the thought of it. I don’t know how it is. It seems to me that kids get promoted more now than they used to. I don’t know.

Narrator: Do you believe women should go in the military?

Brodbeck: That’s a really touchy one. You know, we had a lot of women in the military but you didn’t associate with them. They had their own barracks. They had a big fence and a guard, and that’s where they stayed. Of course, I was married. I wasn’t supposed to be looking anyway. I don’t believe women ought to be on the front lines. I really don’t, not in combat.

Narrator: Why should women not be in combat?

Brodbeck: A woman’s place is in the home raising children. I don’t know. It just doesn’t . . . that’s just like . . . I am retiring in April after 50 years of being fire chief. In those 50 years I have had two or three gals talking about getting on the fire department. I have never put a woman on the fire department. I’ve actually only had one that might make a good one. She was a regular old tomboy. One time that we

were practicing, she came by and I said, "Get over there and get a hold of that hose." And she got a hold of that hose, and it about beat her to death. She said to me, "I don't want to be on the fire department."

But there are a lot of them on fire departments. Most of them are in administrative. It's too tough on them. No way could you (speaking to a girl) handle a hose like some of these boys could. I don't think. Maybe I'm a . . . something. . . I don't know.

Narrator: What is your opinion of the current war in Iraq?

Brodbeck: Well, I had very mixed emotions about going into the war. I felt just like most people did. If those weapons of mass destruction had been there, no doubt in my mind, I'd say go. And I gave a lot of thought about this. But then you get to reading about the things that Saddam has done to people over there; I changed my mind. Maybe we ought to be over there. The only thing I say, get over there and get it done. We're just piddling around like we did in Vietnam and Korea. If we've got the firepower to do it, let's just do it.

Narrator: Is it time for the troops to come home now?

Brodbeck: They can't now. Right now, that place . . . until they approve the election, they've got to stay.

Narrator: How wide-spread can the American military powers be throughout the world?

Brodbeck: Well, the thing is you need to be prepared for war . . . something that you really don't want to do. When I went into the service in 1943, and before that (Japan bombed us in '41) we had troops training with wooden guns. They didn't have any equipment, not even a gun to train with. Now that is something that shouldn't happen to us. I was in the Air Force and we didn't have a decent fighter plane that could match anything the other countries had. The way that the world is now, you have got to be prepared.

Narrators: Thank you for sharing this with us.