

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSTIY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War II Veterans' Project

Naval Experience

O. H. 231

STEPHEN EVANSON, SR

Interviewed

by

Stephen Evanson, Jr.

on

January 23, 1981

STEPHEN EVANSON, SR

On December 25, 1925, Stephen Evankovich, also known as Stephen Evanson, was born to Michael and Julia Carr Evankovich in Struthers, Ohio.

He attended Struthers public schools, including Center Street School, Elm Street School, and Struthers High School, from which he withdrew in December 1943 with the intention of enlisting in the military. However, because of his parent's refusal to sign their minor son's enlistment papers, it was not until he was drafted in February, 1944, that he became a member of the United States Navy.

Mr. Evanson was sent to Great Lakes Naval Base for basic training, and then received his orders to board ship for the Pacific where he saw much action during World War II.

Presently he is a self-employed title-examiner. Stephen and his wife, Margaret, live and work in Struthers. They have three children, Michael, Margaret, and Stephen, Jr.

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INTERVIEWEE: STEPHEN EVANSON, SR.

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SUBJECT: Naval Experiences

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JR: This is an interview with Stephen Evanson, Sr. for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, World War II Veterans' Project, by Stephen Evanson, Jr., at 597 Fifth Street on January 23, 1981 at 6:00 p.m.

Mr. Evanson, what do you remember about your parents and family?

SR: The only thing I can say is that a good part of my past life I can remember in bits and pieces. There is nothing in any great length of time, in one consecutive order of time. I remember parts of my childhood.

JR: Such as? Anything in particular?

SR: I remember how my parents used to go around and cultivate the ground, how they used to have their few chickens around, and so on. I remember those aspects of it. I remember the thrill of watching these chicks hatch, and how they used to sit on them. I was fascinated with the way all this was, like you might say, barnyard style.

JR: Was this before the Depression, or during?

SR: No, this was during the Depression. I grew up during the Depression. Almost everybody had big gardens, or chicken coops. My parents also raised rabbits, and so on. That was the only way to have meat on the table. It was common for neighbors

around there, at that time, to trade animals and barter, if you had a good male, and they had a good female, to improve strains of rabbits and chickens, and so on. It was common, too, for everybody to look for and find inner tubes from old car tires, or something like that. They used to cut them, and put them inside their shoes. When your shoe wore a hole in the bottom, you would put a piece of that in them, or political cards, but the political card never held up. They were just paper. But putting a piece of inner tube inside your shoe, that kept your foot comfortable.

JR: Do you recall what school was like at all?

SR: I remember that most of us were like Raggedy Ann-type of kids. I mean we were rag muffins. We had home-weaved clothes, sweaters. Our shirts were hand-me-downs. Our style of clothes, we wore the high socks, and the garters, and the pull down caps. That was pretty commonplace. I remember the big thing at that time was these aviator-type hats that you pull down. They had goggles on them.

JR: Did you go to school locally in Struthers?

SR: Yes, I grew up in Struthers. I was born, and raised in Struthers. I went through all the Struthers' schools, grade school and high school. I went to my neighborhood school.

JR: Which was that?

SR: Center Street School. From there I went to an intermediate school which was called Elm Street School at the time. That's now where the city hall in Struthers is located, on that property. From there I went to high school. I just went to the Elm Street School for two grades, and then on to high school, Struthers High School.

JR: Did you graduate from high school?

SR: Yes, I graduated from high school, but, no, I didn't go to college.

JR: Were you employed before entering the service?

SR: Yes, I was employed. I had several jobs before I went to the service. The latest job I had before I went to the service was press man at the Youngstown Steel Door Company.

I operated a press that stamped out parts for railroad cars, and also straightened armor plating that was used in different war machinery.

JR: Prior to World War II, what was the atmosphere like between you and your friends? Was there talk of maybe the U. S. entering with, perhaps, Germany?

SR: During the years prior to that, in the thirties, when Hitler came into power, it was just a matter of hearing the news about what was being done. They had newscasts that were newsreels that they showed at movie theatres. It was a brief news report that was given. It would show what was happening there in Europe when Hitler came into power. Slowly he started to expand throughout Europe. There was talk among people about eventually there might be a war. I remember distinctly when I was in high school. I was in the ninth grade. The teacher was sitting there, and he said, "I won't be a bit surprised if a lot of you boys sitting right here in this classroom end up in that war. You're going to go through military service, and then after that the war." He was right.

JR: Were you drafted, or did you enlist?

SR: No, I was drafted. When I tried to enlist, my parents didn't want to sign for me because I was under eighteen at the time. I'm glad that they didn't, because when I was eighteen, I had no choice, I was drafted.

JR: At the time did you feel it patriotic to enter?

SR: Yes, I did. I felt that way. Then I got disenchanted with that type of military life. It wasn't for me, but I stuck it out. It was, you might say, for a cause. Don't forget, the war began with this country because we were attacked at Pearl Harbor.

JR: What were you doing during the attack on Pearl Harbor?

SR: I was sitting home listening to the radio, and all of a sudden this news break came on the radio, and said that the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

JR: Prior to that, though, in your own judgement, what were the feelings like toward the Japanese, and the Japanese-Americans? Was there any prejudice?

SR: Not that I know of, no. I wouldn't be aware of any because I didn't know of any in my locality, or anything like that. It was just after that war started with Japan that, all of a sudden, these people that were born and raised here in this country, that were of Japanese descent, were taken, and put in these relocation camps. Prior to that I didn't know of any animosity at all between the orientals and the people here.

JR: How did your family actually feel about you being drafted?

SR: There was a lot of sadness because a lot of fellows that went before me who were older than me, they went and they saw. I saw that myself, how families were broken apart, and marriages were broken apart, and wives went back to their mothers. The war was on several years before I got into it. Then news would come back about somebody being maimed, or somebody being killed. That was the sad part. That was hard to take for every family. Every time they would see a telegram being delivered on the street somewhere, they knew that it was never good news. They used to deliver telegrams personally to the house, saying that we wish to inform you that your son was killed, or your son was hurt, or missing, or something.

JR: How about your feelings as you were going through boot camp, and maybe, before that. What was it like taking another man's life?

SR: In one way, being young like that when you went to the service, you had almost like a personal grudge against an individual. Actually, you don't know that guy on the other side at all. He was no different than you or I. He left his family, too, to go into the service, and to go into the war. At the time it was just a matter survival. Either me or him is what it amounted to.

JR: Is that what they emphasized?

SR: No, nothing was ever emphasized. They emphasized that you had better be alert to protect your own life, and your comrade's life.

Everything was a unit. In other words, if you stood a watch, and all your buddies were asleep, they depended on you to stay awake to be watchful. The

same, in turn, when you went to sleep, you hoped that the guy was on watch, and being alert. You were dependent on one another for protection.

JR: Getting back to when you were drafted, can you tell, in your own words, what was that day like when you received your draft orders?

SR: When I got that, I was happy. When I got notified, I wanted to go to the service because a friend of mine was already in there. I thought, "Boy, I want to go." I was thrilled about the idea.

I went and got the examination, and went through all this, and I had such a sense of loneliness. One of the loneliest times I ever had, I think, was when I was in boot camp. You were confined for, I think it was, ten or twelve weeks there. At night we were right near a railroad line, and always throughout the night you would hear this lonesome train whistle go, "whoo". Somebody would always make a remark, saying, "Boy, isn't that the loneliest sounding whistle you ever heard. It made you miss home more.

JR: The thought of going home really . . .

SR: I couldn't wait. I couldn't wait.

JR: You couldn't stick it out like a career?

SR: No, because that type of life never appealed to me at all. All the time I was in there, I used to mark days off on the calendar. Weeks turned into months and months into years. I was figuring, "Oh, my God, won't this ever end?" To this day, when I look back on it, it's as though it went by like a flash. I used to dream about will I ever get the opportunity to get married, and have a family, and have a job, and so on.

JR: What branch of the service were you in? If possible, could you share some experiences?

SR: I was in the Naval branch, the United States Navy. I was aboard ship. I spent over two years aboard ship.

JR: What kind of ship?

SR: It was a landing ship in which we carried troops. We carried tanks, and sometimes some equipment that was necessary, too.

JR: Was it usually in a fleet?

SR: You were always part of a convoy. Whenever we traveled about the ocean, it was never alone. There might have been maybe thirty ships together. We traveled in a group. All around us would be these Naval destroyers. They would weave in and out, and go through us, and all around us to protect us from submarines, and from aircraft. We had guns on our own ship too, but they were for protection. We never went in a straight line. We always zigzagged. You zigzagged your course until you got to where you were going. The u-boats, that's what they refer to as submarines, would be watchful. They would be sitting off, and they would travel in packs sometimes. They would try to get a ship if they could.

JR: Can you elaborate? What was it like?

SR: I'll tell you, the very first thing, when I went by convoy over to the South Pacific, was uneventful. Like I said, we zigzagged. We listened to the radios. When we got into the war zones over there we used to practice going to what they called general quarters. When they rang those buzzers and bells that meant that everybody had to hurry and get to their posts to do their job.

I happened to be on a gun. I was a talker, and an ammunition passer. In other words, I had earphones on. They would instruct me from the ship conning tower. That is where the captain was. The officers would say either fire, aim, or whatever the instructions were. They would say track your target. I would holler the same thing, and we would follow the target up. If he said, "Open fire!" we would open fire. He relayed it to me, and I, in turn, relayed it to the fellows around there.

When we got into the war zone, it was night, and we picked up the First Marine Division on this one island down there. When we had gotten them all aboard ship we were going to go for an attack landing. When we were going it was in the middle of the night, and honest to God, all of a sudden general quarters sounded off, two or three o'clock in the morning, pitch black. We all ran, the whole group of ships. All of a sudden I look up there a way and I see this destroyer start to open fire. It was just like a red waterfall going backwards, the tracer bullets going up in the air, going up after something in the

sky. I'm thinking "Oh, my God, it started." It lasted for about a half hour, and then it quit. We still kept going. We were going all through Japanese water for a landing. Prior to that, we all wanted to go to one place.

I never saw so many ships in my life. My God, I would bet you there were thousands and thousands. There was the British fleet, the American fleet, and the French ships. Mostly British and American ships were all together. I never saw so many big ships in my life. As far as you could see in any direction there was nothing but ships.

From there everything split out so we were in one convoy. Everything was in steps. In other words, we were to arrive at this place at, I think, 0800 in the morning. We were supposed to be in our position in order to make a landing, take these Marines over, and drop them off on the beach. Everything was going okay. They were bombing these big war ships. Battleships were there ahead of time. The airplanes were bombing this island. They were bombing it, and bombing it.

Then it was Easter Sunday. I remember that pretty well. That was the first day of the attack. Our turn came. We were coming up in the line to start turning towards the beach. Everybody went up, turned at one time, and then rushed like hell to the beach. We were coming up there, and then, all of the sudden, a shell came from somewhere and hit along side the ship. This big gush of water went up in the air. I figured, "Wow, somebody is going to hit us." It came from somewhere, from the shore probably.

JR: What do they call this particular area?

SR: Okinawa is where I'm talking about. It's where we were going to make our landing.

JR: This was towards the end of the period of war?

SR: Yes, within the last year of the war. I would say within the last eight or nine months of the war, actually. That was in April when we landed on Okinawa. It was the following August when the Japanese surrendered.

JR: Can you tell us about meeting the people, and what you saw?

SR: I was fascinated with the way these people were, but there is so much in common. Even the boys you were in the service with were all from different parts of this country, from South, Northwest, West, and all over. There was rich man, poor man, old, and young. The only difference was that the guys talked different. Most of your ideas were the same.

When you went to different places, different countries, it was nice to go around to see the customs, and enjoy yourself with what they had available in those places. It was nice. It was really different. You could see a big difference, you could compare. In some of these places you saw how those people lived, and what type of huts they lived in, or what they were doing for a living. You compared it, and thought about what you were doing for a living back here. What a difference. What a difference. A lot of those places were primitive compared to what we have. It was interesting.

JR: After the war, you remained in the service?

SR: Everybody was let out according to a point system. You had so many points for the length of time you were in the service, and then you had so many points for all the overseas duty you had. The more points you got, the sooner you got out. The war was over in August, and everything was signed in September, November, but I didn't get out until the following May.

JR: Were you in Japan at that time?

SR: Yes, I was over there.

JR: What was the atmosphere like among the people?

SR: We went over there when it was all final. We were assigned to this one city to go in. We just tied up to the pier, and they gave us patrol duty to stand watch on the shore. The people were very, very subdued. They were very scared in a way. Some of them would try to be friendly. They would give you a little smile or something, but they were very hesitant.

I was on guard duty one day, and Japanese soldiers were walking by. I saw this one soldier who still had his uniform on. He came by and saw me standing there, and he saluted. He kept holding that salute

until I returned it. I figured, what the hell is he saluting me for, I'm not an officer. He saluted me, like showing me some respect of some kind. I saluted him back, and then he put his hand down. He held it until I returned it. When he put it up, I was thinking, why the hell is he saluting me. I didn't bother. I noticed he was still holding it and looking at me while he was walking back, still looking at me. When I returned it, he continued.

Little by little, those people would always get together. The next thing I know, one of the sailors came aboard, and said, "Hey, I know a place down here where we can get some drinks and eat."

I met a family from the United States, a Japanese family. He was in this country. He was educated. His girls were educated in this country. He was over there, and he got caught over there, and he had to stay there. I was in their house, drinking tea with them. You sit on the floor, but you sit on nice cushions. I was fascinated with them. When I went to sit down the girl hurried up and got a cushion. She slid it right underneath me before I hit the floor.

It was nice. As time progressed trading went on, bartering. They had kimonos, and silk. They had nice beautiful things that everybody wanted to buy for souvenirs. Their money exchange was different. If I had money and wanted to buy something, I didn't know what to give them. I would hand them it, and they would take it. They were very nice. From what I assume, they only took exactly what it was worth. They didn't gouge me. A lot of them liked the cigarettes, and the candy. They would have a commodity like that, too, because that was worth money to those people. They had beautiful things to buy, different kinds of cups, and saucers, and silk. Japan was always a silk raising nation. They had beautiful material there.

JR: After the war, and coming home, what effect did the war have on you, psychological, and emotional?

SR: I will say this, I was only eighteen years old. I lived with, and I was associated with fellows that were old enough, almost to be my dad, because of the age limit. They were nice. They were all nice. The older fellows looked after us younger fellows because they had the wisdom. They had the common sense. They were happy-go-lucky. You grew up fast. You looked upon things in a more serious manner. It

wasn't anymore a nonchalant attitude. You had a serious view of things.

JR: So after coming home from war, you were still young?

SR: Yes.

JR: What were your values and ideas compared to somebody else that didn't go?

SR: I was twenty-one years old. Some of the people that I went to school with and so on, that didn't go to the service, in a way they were still living in the school days. I wasn't. I know some fellows that quit school, and then went back to school. They were unhappy because they were more like an adult going to school with high school kids.

JR: But you didn't do that?

SR: No, I didn't do that. I got my completion through this General Education Test that I took, and got my diploma. That's where the difference was.

JR: Did you receive any type of benefits?

SR: Until you found a job, you were given up to one year unemployment. You got so much a month. You were given free college, free tuition paid. Also they would pay you every month, so much money, if you went to college. I went to a different type of school. It was for six months. They paid that, and then they paid me every month for going. The college part, I was foolish for not pursuing that. Several friends that I had, and grew up with, took advantage of that. They went and got four years of college. It was all paid for, and they got their degrees. That was the easiest way to do it, especially when you can get it, and spending money every month. I would be living at home. That was an ideal way of doing it, but I didn't know what I wanted to be. I found out in later years that you don't have to know what you want to be.

JR: Throughout the years, the Korean War conflict eventually broke, and then later on the Vietnam conflict. What did you actually think about that Vietnam War?

SR: I think it was the dumbest thing I ever saw.

JR: Even prior?

SR: Yes, prior, because I couldn't see it. The French were fighting that war for about fifteen or twenty years before Americans ever went there. They referred to it as Indo-China at that time, not Vietnam. It was Indo-China. The French got knocked out of there, got kicked out of there. Then this country had to go and get involved with it. Instead of this being just a little bit it got to be more, and more, and more, which was dumb. I didn't like any part of it to start with, any war, unless you have to fight for your own survival. That war wasn't for any benefit to us at all.

JR: When you were home from the service was there celebrations?

SR: Yes, when you came home you were treated good. People used to pay my check, and people used to buy me drinks. I used to get free rides on the bus, and things like that.

It was an entirely different matter compared to the Vietnam War. It was like night and day. Those fellows, I think it's a shame for what they had to sacrifice, and what they received. They received nothing, and they sacrificed everything, is what it amounted to.

JR: They were young just like you?

SR: That's right. In our situation, at least we had a cause; our country was at war. It was attacked. It was a cause. Hitler was rampaging through Europe. He was a big menace, an evil. There was a great cause for us to go to war. If we didn't, we would have had a hell of a time surviving. We would have been having a hard time. In Vietnam, these little police wars, I think that's a bunch of nonsense. It's really nonsense. That was getting involved in something that we had nothing to gain by.

JR: What did you think of President Roosevelt?

SR: I thought he was one of the greatest men around, and I still do. He got in during the depths of the Depression, and was in through the Depression years. Throughout the thirties work started building up a little at a time.

JR: Especially in this valley?

SR: Yes. I remember when work was bad, and people used

to jump on the coal train down in Lowellville. They would start throwing coal off the coal trains all the way up until they got to Struthers. Then they would jump off. They would go with bushel baskets, sacks, and that, and pick up the coal that they threw off to take home to burn in the furnace. That was common practice. My older brother used to do that. I was small then.

Work was bad. Some people were working one day a week, and some people two days a week. Homes were being foreclosed, and people were losing their houses.

JR: Did you get involved in any of the early FDR programs?

SR: When they came out with the CCC program, I almost got into that. Again, my parents wouldn't let me. That is youth Civilian Conservation Corps.

JR: It was almost like an army.

SR: In the CCC you planted trees, and you cut trees, and you cleaned up roads. Like army-style, you got paid so much a day, and you got your three meals, and you got your medical care, and so on, and so forth. You were shipped to different places. You might have been in North Dakota. You went around like that.

He started that program, and then he started the WPA. /Works Progress Administration/ That's how the Struthers' Stadium was built down here. They had different projects going on the streets, and sidewalks. People got paid so much a day. That gave them money to live with, where before, they had nothing. That way they were able to buy something.

JR: At that time you were probably too young, but maybe you could have seen it /the Depression/ coming prior to the stock market crash in 1929?

SR: I wouldn't have known about that because I would have only been several years old at the time.

JR: Did the government realize that?

SR: Yes. That's when Roosevelt was brought in. They decided to make some changes to prevent all that from happening again. They put different controls in the bank. They put in these deposit insurances that you

have in the banks.

My parents lost money in the banks, too. They had saving accounts, and went to get it, and they got nothing. What you had in there was gone. As the years progressed, works built a little bit / jobs increased 7. What I think made the works build up a little, too, was Hitler starting that rampage in Europe, and Japan. This country started to arm itself. This country was providing armaments for England, and for France. They were buying, so work started picking up here. The steel mills started working better. One company lead to another. It started building up because we were supplying the world then.

After work got good, real good, you could quit one place, go off to another place, and get a job without any problem. That's when their pay scales were different for a time there. You could go to work at one steel mill, and maybe work there for two dollars an hour, and you could go to another steel mill, and they would say, "Over here we pay \$175 an hour." It wasn't uniform until the unions got in to make it all uniform industry-wide.

Primarily it was the war build-up, this European and Asian build-up going on.

JR: What did you think of Roosevelt during the war, after the Depression, his decisions, and things like that?

SR: It benefited all of us, the country as a whole, because it brought prosperity. It brought more into the marketplace, and more people made money. More money was spent. It slowly built up so everybody benefited from it. In general, I would say his leadership was very good.

Of course, some people resented the taxing system. Years ago the rich never paid taxes. Then they initiated the income tax and at least everybody paid something.

His programs, in general, were very good. I would say the majority of people in this country think he was one of the greatest presidents because of the programs he had which are referred to as the New Deal.

JR: Looking back, what changes would you have liked to see?

SR: Do you mean for myself, or for the country?

JR: Both.

SR: I would like the political scheme of things to change. I don't like the way our elections are at all. We have an electoral college, and we have a popular vote. You can get the popular vote, and loose the presidency by the electoral college. I don't like that. I think the political scheme of things could change for the better. Right to this day, a lot of this can be changed.

I think they have too many guys running for office that have been in there too long. One guy can get in there, and stay in there from 30 to 35 years. Hell, his ideas never change. They're always the same as when he first started. Maybe he has fresh ideas for the first ten years, but after that he's stagnant. Instead some other fellow should come in with new ideas. They should make a limit and say you can't run for more than three terms in office. After that you have to get out for somebody else. In this country, the way it is, the guy in office, his chances of winning are always greater than the guy running against him. He has everything to his advantage. He is the incumbent. If they put a rule down that you can't serve more than so many terms, then I think it would work out for the better for all of us.

In the old political scheme of things people looked upon world problems between leaders; like when Stalin was in power, and Hitler, saying, "Well, that guy is sixty years old, and he can only be in power for another twenty years, then he is going to die, and things have got to change. That was one avenue the political system between countries was looked upon. If we wait it out, the guy is going to die. Of course, while that leader is dying, our leaders are dying, too. It's a constant replacement of leaders and people all the time.

JR: Is there anything else that you think is important to add that we didn't cover, maybe in reference to the war, or Depression, or something?

SR: A lot of people say that those were the good old days, I think that the good old days are always now. There is no such thing. The good old days are now. I would rather have the standards we have today than the standards we had a long time ago.

We've got more available to us. Communication is a

big thing today. We have good communication. The only thing about it, your television was a good thing, but today it's reached a point of saturation. I used to sit and listen to a story on the radio, and use my own imagination to picture the scene. If it was about cowboys, no matter what it was about, I would visualize my own scene in my mind. When you have a television, you don't have to do that. You just sit there, and you watch. Somebody else has done that for you. It's still a good thing. Communication is fast today. You know about what is happening no matter where it happens.

JR: There is one question I didn't go over which I should have asked. Being as you were, involved in the war, you have seen from that time until now all the conflicts that the United States has gone through. Would you want your children, or anybody to ever enter the service?

SR: No, I wouldn't want anyone to enter the service.

JR: Drafting?

SR: No, I don't like that. I would say, make it attractive enough for some people that just have a natural ability, and natural attraction for that kind of a life. I would say, make it worthwhile enough for them to go, so that we can have the best. If you force somebody into something they don't want to do, you're not going to get the enthusiasm. If they hate that, it would be more of a problem than if you got somebody in there who really liked it.

I can say this, there's nothing wrong with every youth being familiar with how to use a firearm, or something like that, but he doesn't have to be drafted. They can take two weeks out of every year, and hold the course in the schools. They can say everybody has to learn how to do this, and everybody has to learn first-aid, and everybody has to do this. Basic [training], they don't have to go to the service for that.

I wouldn't want my kids to go to the service because the rules are entirely different. In the service it is always, they're right and you're wrong no matter what you do. If you've got a sadistic leader, he can see to it that you never have liberty, and make it miserable for you.

JR: In other words, your full feeling on the military was?

SR: I resented it. I resented the whole attitude of their program. I didn't care for their program at all. Of course, they have made a lot of changes today. They have made it like a work day. They give you weekends off, and so on. Still, I don't see it. For somebody who likes that kind of life, that's fine. There's some people that enjoy that. They really like it because they want that sense of security. They don't have to think. They'll learn a trade, and they'll learn their program, and so on. That type of life is for them. Some people don't want that kind of life. They want to be able to make their own decisions.

JR: Today, is there any prejudices you have, maybe, against the Japanese people?

SR: No, I can't say I have any at all. The prejudice is against the political leadership. I can't stand these political machines, or leaders. There's where my prejudice lies, it isn't against the people themselves. Certain factions get into power, and nobody else can get in. That I don't like.

END OF INTERVIEW