

Dean Kirkham

as interviewed by Judy Hansen
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I was born the 9th of July 1923 to Oliver and LaVerde Kirkham right here in this home (708 W Main, Lehi). There are five of us; Reed, Avery, Donna, myself and Dale in the family. I graduated from Lehi High School and then I went to Branch Agricultural College in Cedar City to play football. I had a scholarship. That school is now SUU or Southern Utah University. There were four of us from Lehi that went; Mark Bradshaw, Keith Bushman, me, and Bob Zimmerman.

I was down in Cedar City a year and then I came home. Everybody was gone or was going into the military and I knew that I would be going too. When I enlisted I went to Salt Lake. They gave me a choice of which branch of service I wanted; I went back home a Marine. I felt the Marines were the right way to go. I entered the military in May 1943. I was 19 years old. I had to wait a few days before they shipped me out but they ended up putting me on a train and sending me to San Diego. I never went to Camp Pendleton which is the most well-known Marine base; I was sent to Marine Corp Air Station Miramar to get processed and then onto El Centro Marine Base Air Station before they turned it into Naval Air Facility El Centro.

I had been working in auto parts before I went into the service and when I said "auto parts" they put me in the Marine Air Corp. I presume they figured that was similar to aircraft.

My first year in the military I parked planes. They would fly all the planes into our position there. Too often they couldn't fly them to the coast in San Diego because it was too foggy. I made Sergeant right away. I had a group of men that had to park planes. They were flying planes in as fast as they could get them there. These were brand new planes straight from the



factories. It was quite a project getting these planes parked because they were flying in by the hundreds.

I didn't mind my time in the service. Of course there were some parts of it I didn't like. One day one of the planes was in the parking lot and the guy that wanted to use it yelled at me and talked me into going on a joy ride with him. I said, "OK." He ended up telling a whole bunch of other guys too. We all got in the plane and started taxi-ing off and an officer stopped us. Another guy came running toward us and wanted to go so I got out and he got in. Well, they were flying up this canal and there were some cables that run across it. The plane hit those cables and killed the guy in the back seat that traded places with me. I guess it wasn't my day to die.

It wasn't too long after this they put me on a ship and sent me to Peleliu. That was one of those cruises where we were always on watch wondering if someone was going to start shooting at us. The Battle of Peleliu (Sept – Nov 1944) had just ended when I got there. We replaced a whole bunch of people that was in that battle. I served with the 396th Platoon.

The Japanese had built tunnels on Peleliu. When the American's had taken the island over during the Battle of Peleliu there were still Japanese living in these tunnels. I remember at night hearing our American Soldiers firing their weapons at the Japanese soldiers coming out of the tunnels. I was thankful I didn't have to go inside of them. We were in pretty good shape on the airfield and didn't have to worry too much about the Japanese.

I was assigned one specific plane that I was pretty well acquainted with; the Chance Vought Corsair and one pilot. The pilot I was assigned to was Captain W. I. Branagan from Michigan. It was my responsibility to get his plane ready to go in the mornings. He flew out pretty much every day. I'd have to go through the plane, gas it up, change the oil every so often, and make sure things were in working order.

One day Captain Branagan took me for a ride; not in the Corsair because that was only for one person – he showed me where he had caught a bunch of Japanese on a boat. There wasn't any left after he finished. During the first part of the Battle of Peleliu the American's had sunk a bunch of



Dean (left) and Captain Branagan

Japanese ships. While I was flying up with Captain Branagan the water was so blue that I could look down and see those ships lying on the bottom of the ocean. There were a lot of ships; maybe a dozen or so. They are probably still there except what the treasure hunters have hauled off.

I remember when they announced the US was going into Japan. You'd hear so many things over there that you'd wonder if it was true or not. I was in Peleliu when we dropped the atomic bomb and we wondered if that was true or not. There had been so many heavy bombers that had come and gone. You hate to see people killed.

The morning the war was over Captain Branagan brought me a case of Canadian Brandy – (he laughs and comments, maybe that is what is wrong with me now) Red Cap Ale. He brought it down to the barracks. Those Officers had stuff we enlisted guys didn't have but this was the only brandy I had seen over there. I didn't drink it all; it was shared all around. I'd like to have got a hold of Captain Branagan after the war was over but I never did.

Believe it or not I used to play basketball over there. I had to play basketball to keep in shape for football (he laughs). We had tournaments between the Islands. After the war was over with we would fly to Guam and the different islands to play. If we ever went anywhere we had to go in a plane. We were about 600 miles from Guam – there were 10 of us players on the team. We played for the championship against a team that had all black players. They beat us but we expected that. Oh boy what a game!

They eventually put me on a troop ship, the slowest way back on earth; they weren't anxious to get me home. I came back to Santa Ana Naval Air Station. They handled things very well. The first thing they did was fix us a good dinner. I remember fillin'-up. There were sure a lot of marines there. I ended up doing some guard duty. I didn't mind doing that because when I had joined I knew I would be assigned some guard duty. Santa Ana was very close to Ray Kirkham, Tom's dad and my brother Avery who lived in Los Angeles. I was really close to them and was able to go visit from time to time. I was there about six months or something like that.

After I was discharged in May 1946 I came home on a bus. The military paid my way home. The bus stopped in Cedar City and I thought I'd go see an old girlfriend I had when I was going to school there; Vilda Bowman. She had been writing me for a while but the letters stopped. When I got to her house her mother seen me comin' and ran out of the house shooin' me away. She told me Vilda had gotten married. I guess that was why she quit writing me. It happened she married Craig Crabb. I had to pick up my bag and go back to the bus stop.

When I got home I went back to work for my brother Reed at Bradshaw auto parts. Then I decided to go down and talk to the Utah County Sherriff to see if I could get a job using my military guard experience. I went to work as a Deputy Sheriff for Utah County and worked for them over thirty years.

I married Gloria Stone from Provo on February 19, 1948. She was a pretty nice girl. We had five children; Karen, Terry, Rebecca, Gail, and Barbara Jo.