

# Eugene Strasburg

Interviewed by Judy Hansen

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My parents were George and Mary Taylor Strasburg. I was born March 21, 1924 in our old house in Lehi at 791 North 100 East. That house is torn down now. I was raised in Lehi.

I didn't graduate my senior year because they had me go down to that Utah Vocation School in Provo<sup>1</sup> during my senior year in High School. After I got out of the vocational school I taught a bunch of women in the old Lehi High shop. I taught them how to plow and use the mowing machines. This was for National defense because I think they were anticipating WWII. They had

a class for women. I remember some of the women were from Cedar Fort. Delbert Fugal was the shop teacher and I was instructing these women on how to adjust plows and mowing machines. I think this was under civil defense. I wrote L.B. Adamson while I was in the Navy asking why I didn't have my high school diploma and he didn't bother to answer. He was the Principal of the Lehi High School.

I tried to enlist through the post office in Provo but they wouldn't take me because I had run a beet knife in my knee when I was topping beets in Lehi. I used to have a scar there. So when I tried to enlist they wouldn't take me because of my knee but then they drafted me (he laughs).

I got married October 25, 1942, a year before I left for the Navy to Sara Joanne West. Ernest Webb married us civilly and then a year after that we went through the Salt Lake Temple. The day after I got out of the temple I left for the Navy. People looked at us pretty strange because we got married so young. They made us get married civilly a year before they would let us go through the temple.

I was inducted October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1943. I was 19 years old. We were told we had to report at the Provo depot which was pretty close to the Provo Tabernacle. My brother Allen took me, Keith Eddington and some others down and we got on the old Orem; the old Inter-urban<sup>2</sup>. We went into Salt Lake, down at the "center," for an examination on an old street named Motor Avenue. They don't call it that now but it is about 50 south, ½ block south of where the old Eagle Gate was before they moved it. I reported for duty and that is where I went for my physical and where I took my oath for the Navy. They never said a word about my knee.



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<sup>1</sup> Utah Vocational School later became Trade Tech and has since become Utah Valley University.

<sup>2</sup> The Inter-urban was called the Orem by the local's and was a train that ran from Provo to Salt Lake. It had a stop in Lehi.

I went to Camp Peary, Virginia for my basic training. They called it Captain Ware's hog farm<sup>3</sup>. They fed you hominy grits so much you couldn't eat them after a while. You'd get so sick of them you'd throw them in the garbage. On our duty day we fed them to the pigs. This Captain Ware sold the pigs back to the Navy. I know Captain Ware ran some ships a ground so they broke him down to a Captain. Boot camp was a lot of drilling, saluting, and calisthenics where we had to run the obstacle course and do push-ups.

I left Captain Ware's hog farm in Camp Peary, Virginia and went to Gulfport, Mississippi for advanced training. We trained mostly in mortars, drilling, and a lot of shooting. It didn't amount to much. We were there for two or three weeks and they shipped us to Port Hueneme, California and then on May 1, 1944 we left overseas to Hawaii. I was assigned to the 127<sup>th</sup> Seabee Battalion; Company A; platoon 5.

Our troop ship was tied up in Pearl Harbor. I got my Brother Lloyd's address who was serving in the 222<sup>nd</sup> field artillery and Warrant Officer Ham from San Gabriel, California looked Lloyd up for me. Lloyd came down to the dock. They wouldn't let us get off but Officer Ham let me go down the gang plank and talk to my brother. I got to spend a few minutes with my brother Lloyd at Pearl Harbor. We talked about family and the good old days. Lloyd was serving in Maui and when I moved to Hawaii Lloyd moved on.



*Eugene with his clotheswasher*

I was stationed at Naval Air Station Pu'unene on Maui. At that time Moloka'i, the leper island was quarantined. Now they say you can contact there so they've opened it up but we were right next to the island of Moloka'i. The main airport on Maui was Kahului and it was too small. They took our battalion of Seabees and had us lengthen and widen the airstrip so they could land B-29's there. They couldn't get gravel so they made us widen the airstrips with ciders. I was quite inventive. I made a clothes washer out of an old barrel and a crank. You could fill it full of water, put your clothes in, and turn the crank to get the laundry done.

In Maui while we were widening an airstrip the airplanes would pull a target through the air. The guys with anti-aircraft gun would shoot at that target the airplane was pulling. Once it ricocheted off the target and ended up cutting a guy's leg off while we were working on that airstrip.

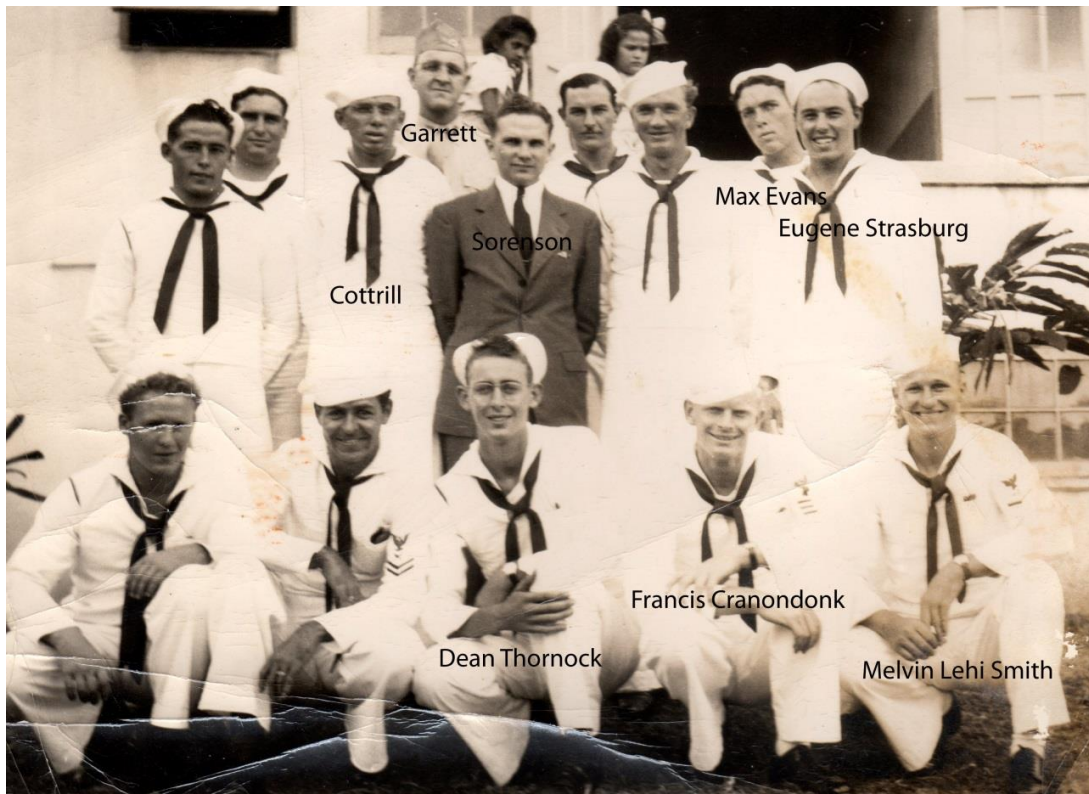
Our battalion made a lot of what they called revetments. They would put airplanes in them. A revetment was a little pile of dirt. We had a little D-6 cat dozer that would push the dirt up and then they would park the airplanes between these revetments for protection. Well, they allowed us to go to the base theater to have a special interest group of LDS people; Boyd Fugal from Pleasant Grove was one of them. We came out of that group just as two airplanes came in; one on top of the other. That top propeller chopped the guy up on the bottom. We tried to get over

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<sup>3</sup> Captain J.G. Ware was raising pigs on Peary base as a private venture.

there to help him out but the 50 caliber and machine gun shells were going all through the air and they wouldn't let us get over to it. I watched that plane come in and chop that guy right up.

They allowed us to use part of the facilities for the LDS servicemen. There was only four LDS guys in our unit; Dean Thornock, Francis Crandock, Melvin Lehi Smith, and me. Orville Hancock from Provo was baptized on Maui at a place called 'the thumb.' He was buried in a strip of water and confirmed there. We all witnessed it. We would attend church with the Hawaiian's and once they asked Melvin Smith if he would talk in Sacrament meeting. He thought he knew the language and he said the wrong thing. All those Kanakas<sup>4</sup> really broke out laughing at him (he laughs).



*LDS Servicemen*

The Battles of Samar and Leyte Gulf took place in October 1944. In April 1945 we got orders to move to the Philippines as part of the 7<sup>th</sup> fleet. We landed in the Leyte-Samar area the end of May. We worked on the airstrips in the Philippines on a PT<sup>5</sup> boat repair base. We put fabricated field tanks together and a pipe-line so they could fuel map PT boats down on the beach where we were. While I was in the Philippines they had new machinery; new bulldozers, motor-graters, and everything.

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<sup>4</sup> A person of Hawaiian descent. Came from the Hawaiian word meaning man.

<sup>5</sup> Short for Patrol Torpedo boat.

Bob Hope and Francis Langford entertained us in the Philippines. We had an open air theater that was just coconut logs that you would sit on and watch old movies if you were lucky. That is where they came to entertain us.

After the Philippines they sent us to Japan. I know that they signed the peace treaty<sup>6</sup> with Japan while we were on our way over there. I was assigned to go over with the heavy equipment on the 797 Rice Victory. Jerry Larson from Lehi was the 1<sup>st</sup> mate on the Rice Victory. He took and showed me around the ship. He showed me the Sperry-Gyro compass and everything. (Eugene laughs) We were even in a typhoon. It was scary as the devil. The bough of the ship would go right under water and then it would come out. We had an Oliver wagon crane on the top deck that broke loose and it would swing around. We had to tie it tight. We had to get out on the deck in the middle of this typhoon, hook up the chains, the cables, tie it down, and stop it from swinging. It was bad news.

During that typhoon a road-roller broke loose down in the hull of the ship. I had to go down there. You could hear it roll back and forth, “ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-boom!” When I went to get up I was the last one up. I climbed up the ladder and tried to get out but they closed the water-tight hatch and there I was at the top of that ladder during that typhoon. I was locked in there and couldn’t get out. I hollered and Warrant Officer Ham was out on deck. He heard me and opened the door and let me out of there. I was really scared. I didn’t like that.

We went to Yokosuka, Japan and repaired an airstrip. Joanne was shook up about it because the Japanese peace treaty had been signed and she wanted me to come home but I went to Japan to stay with the heavy equipment.

I came back the United States on the U.S.S. Prairie. On the way back to California they lowered the points down so we qualified for a discharge. I thought we were going back to the States for a repatriation leave and didn’t find out I was going home until I got to San Francisco.

I served my country for 2 years and 2 months. I was discharged on the 24<sup>th</sup> of December 1945 in Shoemaker, California and rode the train home. There was a mix-up on our train. It was the Western Pacific and we stopped at Ogden. I had wired Joanne that I would meet her at the depot in Salt Lake but there was a lay-over from Ogden to Salt Lake. I didn’t want to wait so I got on the Bamberger railroad and when I got to Salt Lake nobody was there. Joanne was down at my folk’s place in Lehi. I called my friend, Harold Allred and he took me to my folk’s home in Lehi. That was the first time I’d seen Joanne after being overseas. Good Ol’ Harold hauled me down there. I was home and got to see my son Kenneth for his 2<sup>nd</sup> birthday.

I felt guilty because they called me a veteran but I was never in combat. The battleships were shooting over our heads when I was in the Philippines but I was never in battle. I was working on the heavy equipment as a mechanic. They tell me not to feel guilty about it because our work helped the PT boats to get in and out safe and the airplanes land. I was in the service and did what they told me to do.

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<sup>6</sup> Surrender of Japan was announced August 15, 1945 and formally signed September 2<sup>nd</sup>.

There wasn't anything I liked about the military. They said us enlisted people were just enlisted people not Officers and gentlemen. I said, "I'm just as much a gentleman as those weird-o Officers." They didn't like that.

Hanging a blue star mother's service flag<sup>7</sup> in the window was really big during WWII. Mother had one hanging in the window that had three stars. There were three of us boys in the service at the same time; Allen, Lloyd, and myself. I wonder how mother stood that?

After I got home I worked for Telluride Motor Company in Provo, the Ford Dealer. Eventually I ended up with Union Pacific Railroad. I get railroad retirement through the Union Pacific. I was an official for the railroad so I get a fancy little pension from the railroad besides my retirement which is better than nothing.

My oldest son Kenneth was born the day after Christmas when I was serving in Gulfport, Mississippi. I remember that. The Red Cross gave me a few days leave so I could come home to see him but it was only a few days. He is gone, he passed away July 3, 2013. My next one is Larry and he was named after his Grandfather, my father-in-law Lawrence Henson West. Now his boy, my grandson that lives with me is also named Lawrence. Then there was Nyle and my daughter Robyn. We had three boys and a girl.

I'm proud to be invited as a veteran on the Honor Flight this coming October. That is something I am really looking forward to.

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<sup>7</sup> The mother's service flag that was hung in homes had a blue star for the serviceman on a white field surrounded by a red boarder. One star represented each child from the family that was serving. A smaller gold star meant the child died while in service (not necessary killed in action). One of the most famous flags was that of the five Sullivan brothers who all perished on the U.S.S. Juneau.