

Interview with
SHELBY FREI

February 5, 2018

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SHELBY FREI

Shelby Frei was interviewed by Randy Bunn on February 5, 2018 in St. George, Washington County, Utah. He related his memories of serving in World War II. Brady Fronk, M. Bunn also participated.

RB: Where did you grow up?

SF: Right here.

RB: Right here in Santa Clara [Washington County, Utah]. What was your father's name?

SF: Vivian [Jacob Frei]

RB: [What] was your mother's name?

SF: Jessie [(Hafen) Frei.

RB: How many [children] were in your family growing up?

SF: I don't know. [Shelby's siblings were: Landon, Howard, Victor Russell, Dorothy and Phyllis Frei.]

RB: Did you come from a large family?

SF: I just don't know.

RB: Did you serve in World War II? [Were] you in the [United States] Army?

SF: They made me go and I don't know why. There were older [fellows] here that could have [gone]. I was way out on my line.

RB: How old were you?

SF: [I was] twenty [years old].

RB: You were a young [fellow].

BF: Were you drafted?

SF: Yes. All the other ones came from the East.

RB: Were you the only one from Utah in your unit? Where did you train?

SF: Back this way somewhere.

RB: Somewhere here in Utah? Or did you leave Utah [for training]?

SF: I left Utah.

RB: What did you train to [do in the Army]? What was your job in the Army?

SF: Medic.

RB: What did you think about being a medic?

SF: I never could figure out why a young [fellow] like me [was] pulled out [drafted]. There were all kinds of [fellows who] were more eligible than I was. Why that happened, I don't know.

RB: You never figured that out? [Laughter]

SF: No.

RB: When you did your training as a medic, what did they teach you to do?

SF: We would go on a shift. What they did, usually, they would have to make an army out of it. Then they would split you up. We went out this way. It was up in Salt Lake [City, Salt Lake County, Utah], I think. I was cut off a portion of it and so I went in town to see if I could get something [so I could] bring my wife [Jewell Frei] to live there.

RB: Were you married when you [were drafted]?

SF: Yes. I wouldn't have married.

RB: [You wouldn't have married] if you knew that you were heading off?

SF: Yes. Anyway, I was there just waiting. You had to line up. I had a sergeant come and talk to me. He was a full sergeant. I mean he had all the stripes. [He] almost scared me.

RB: [Laughter] What did he have to say?

SF: He said, "Are you going to have your wife come?" I said, "Yes, if I can find a place for her to live." He said, "I have a place. I think you will be around here [inaudible] and you can. Maybe my wife would stay here. She won't stay. She comes in, gets a little money and leaves."

RB: [Laughter]

SF: I went with him and said, "Let's give it a try." So my wife came over because I had a place for her. She got connected with his wife. He said, "When she comes she might stay two or three days [laughter] and that's it. Maybe now if I get your wife in there maybe she will settle down." It happened that that is what [we did]. Take care of me, too. Sometimes he would bring his old car out there because he was the boss in another group. He said, "You saved me." He would come and start hauling me in too. He said, "I hope she can stay a little longer. My wife will leave me." I said, "I don't know what we are trying to do." We thought they were leaving out so I sent my wife back home.

RB: What happened after that?

SF: They didn't go. They cut us off. I went back into town. There was nothing I could do. I guess his wife had left him by then. But she stayed there, hell, for a couple or three months, something like that. Sometimes he would bring his car into town. It was a government car and hauled me into town.

RB: Was that [in] Salt Lake [City]?

SF: No. It was back East that way, yes.

RB: Do you recall how long you were in training there?

SF: I don't know. Anyway, when we [were] settled down, I don't know where we were. I think it was in the Army in our group. I don't know what somebody was trying to pull, but the officer took me with him. He wanted me to accompany him so he wouldn't be alone. [Inaudible] I had gone with one of the officers. They all wanted me. I was the youngest one. All at once a thing [problem] came in and they were going to arrest me. They [got] mixed up [in the wrong situation]. I can't remember just what it was. Lucky I was with this officer down in the [area] there. Somebody was trying to just knock the hell out of me. The officer came in with me, [We were in our groups]. He said, "Who in the hell is doing this? Frei was with me and he didn't go take anything." So they believed their officer and that stopped it right there. I didn't hear any more about it. [Inaudible]

RB: Good. At some point did you take a ship over to Europe?

SF: Yes.

RB: Where did you go?

SF: We went to California. Then we went from there [in] a big circle. You couldn't go straight across because the submarines were shooting them all. So they had us go down to California, get on one and go way around to Switzerland, and this and that and the other. We were a month getting over there.

RB: When you got over there, did you go to England or Italy?

SF: We were fighting a war with the Germans in a different place down in a different country. That is when we finally knocked them back. [Inaudible] I just can't remember that.

BF: Were you attached to a unit or were you in a MASH, a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital?

SF: I was attached to a [company] but they broke it up into four different [companies]. They had a company and then they dropped them into four companies because there were medics.

RB: What do you remember about your time in Europe?

SF: There were a lot of things I couldn't figure out.

RB: Like what?

SF: [Laughter] I got off work. I was off and I didn't want to go back to bed. One of the [fellows] said, "Ride with me and I'll show you [around]. We will go down here and pick up [dead bodies]." We are taking the dead ones up for them to pick up.

RB: Did you have to pick up dead soldiers?

SF: We had them [after] they died.

RB: While you were caring for them?

SF: Yes.

RB: What happens when a soldier dies in Europe? Did they ship them back to the [United] States?

SF: No.

RB: Did they bury them?

SF: Yes. I went back there. When we got over there, there were two big cars that you don't see any more. They have panels in between the trucks, just wood panels. When we got there I just went to see how they did it. They were sitting there and they said, "We came here and our unit had pulled out. We can't do anything so we just sit here." We said, "Can you take these that we have?" [Inaudible] One truck wasn't quite full and they could put some in. That is what we did. Anyway we just

handed them their tags and then we left. The others had to wait until they got there.

[END OF RECORDING ONE.]

SF: I can't see. I am blind.

RB: You can't see. Can you see me at all?

SF: Yes, I can see you.

BF: It is just a blur, essentially.

RB: You were talking about having to collect the bodies and put them in the truck. Where did you take them?

SF: The trucks took them. We handed them their tags. This is what really gets you. They had no idea what tag was [for which body].

RB: You couldn't say whether their dog tag was for this body or another body?

SF: Yes. So I can't believe the people [who] come back in the grave yard and take their soldier home, but they were not taking their soldier.

RB: It may have been a different son or brother or father.

SF: Yes. If anyone can believe that, there is something wrong with you.

RB: That sounds like it would have been a pretty tough thing to do dealing with these American soldiers [who] had been killed. Your job was to help preserve their body. How did you feel about that at the time?

SF: When you are around dead ones all day, all during your shift, it is nothing. In the night there were usually a couple of nurses shuffling around at night. There are two of them on the same [shift]. It just kind of gets me because there is no way that their [son] is in that grave. That is a bunch of baloney. We got used to it. When the war was getting toward the end we [were] captured. At night you might think it is funny, but we would change off at night. We would take a couple of hours sleep. One nurse would go off. I remember lying there with her. She would turn her back and I would turn my back. [Laughter] It seems funny, but when we are with them all the time. When the war ended, or was ending, they stopped us.

RB: The Germans?

SF: No. The medics that we were in, the whole [battalion]. The French Army got out of there. They wanted to be the ones to come to their country and get the men.

They had a small army and they wanted the privilege of getting back into their country. So we sat still. It was in the winter. The damn snow was a [inaudible].

RB: The winter of 1945?

SF: Yes.

RB: The war is drawing to a close? So what happened?

SF: I'm skipping way back. Like I say, we are used to being right with some of the nurses.

RB: They are just your coworkers?

SF: Yes. We just worked together. We were used to it. They cut us off and we hadn't [received] any mail in six or eight months. A German came in and acted like he had a bank roll for the Germans. He said, "I don't want to go back. You can have this bank roll and everything." Of course, to us that money is no good. We weren't even getting any money. We went for months in that cold. We had just what we had on our backs, mostly.

RB: What did you eat?

SF: They would get [food] just like they did before.

RB: Did you eat out of a can?

SF: Oh no. In fact, I remember they pulled me off a month to help in the kitchen. I quite liked it. Let me think a minute.

RB: You were telling me about how you [were] captured.

SF: It was [when] the Germans were getting out of there. The French wanted to take it and stop us.

RB: Did the Germans come into the place where you [fellows] were staying?

SF: When they came and took us we went up at the front, they were trying to get out [of] the front too. It came like that, a little bit of [a] peak. It was all Germans and we were right at that little peak. We drove up and they opened fire on us. But I was on the back end in one of the trucks. There was another officer coming with us because he was going with one of the nurses. He wanted to know where she would be. Hell, he got shot and [it] killed him. We lost part of the others. They did try to crawl up and said that [they] didn't know he was a medic.

RB: The German said that?

SF: Yes.

RB: Did they take you prisoner?

SF: They did, but they took us away. We rolled off in the ditch. They always told us if somebody [started] shooting to roll off in the ditch. One of those [fellows] came down there and we were still in the ditch. He had an electric gun and it would scare you to death. He said, "Geh raus! Geh raus! [Get out!]" The other [fellow] said, "What in the hell is he saying?" I said, "He is telling us what to do." I was the only one who could talk with him. I said to the others, "Get up. He wants us in front of him. Maybe he is just putting us up in front together so he can open up that machine gun and kill all of us."

RB: Did you think that you were going to die that day?

SF: I thought that so many times that it didn't worry me.

RB: That is probably true.

SF: When we got up there, we didn't lose any nurses or any of our doctors. We still had them. They had us lined up there and they were taking everything [off of] us and throwing it on a pile. We had one person in my bunch, but I didn't even know it. I didn't know two-thirds of the bunch I was with. I didn't even know it because I didn't ever see them. He was the [fellow who couldn't] see without his glasses.

RB: Did they take his glasses?

SF: Yes, they took his glasses and threw them on the pile. All at once one of the soldiers on the other side [who] must have had some authority because he walked in there, picked up the glasses and gave them [back] to this [fellow].

RB: He did? Wow, that was nice!

SF: We found out they don't want to fight, but they had to.

RB: Is that right?

SF: Yes. I don't know how many [were] killed, but quite a bunch.

RB: Were you with the group there and the Germans for two days?

SF: Three days. They took us down in a place where they had water and some shelves that you could sleep on, but they were building [a place] for the officers. We lost all of that. They set all the trucks on fire and everything else.

BF: Were bodies still in the trucks?

SF: They had to be. I was clear in the back so I didn't see it all. But it was a good thing we were in the back. The other [fellow] didn't say a word. He was scared too, I guess. [Inaudible] They put us down in this thing that had a big door to get in and out. They said, "We will bring wounded [soldiers] in here to you. But don't come out this door or you will be shot down."

RB: Was it kind of like a barn?

SF: Yes. So we couldn't go outside. We had to be inside.

RB: So did you tend to the wounded?

SF: Yes. We were taking care of them. We were burying most of them. We would just take them. I know I said we would just dig it deep enough to cover them because they were sure to take them out again. I was right. They covered them. We were in the back so we didn't get into all that [activity]. I had some of the damndest things [experiences]. The time that they tried to stick something on me I was with one of the officers. That is what saved my life. He said, "Who in the hell is doing this? Shelby was with me."

RB: [Laughter]

SF: Of course, he told them. I don't know what happened.

RB: After three days [of] being captured by the Germans, how did you get out of that?

SF: The tanks came in.

RB: The American tanks?

SF: The American tanks.

RB: Did the Germans retreat or did they die?

SF: They retreated back up.

RB: What happened after you were saved by the American tanks? Did they take you away from that place?

SF: Yes. They took us back. We didn't have anything only just what we had on us. We had to go back and it took two weeks to get our equipment back. Then they sent us right back [out].

BF: Did they ever find the burned trucks or did they have you go and search for them?

SF: I don't know. I just can't remember about that. I was clear back in the back.

RB: How did it make you feel when you [were] rescued?

SF: They sent a truck in there every day of [with nothing but] wounded. We never even had anything. We had [a place] where [we] could sleep, we had water, but nothing to eat.

RB: When the Americans came, were you pretty happy to see them?

SF: Oh yes. I had so many of those kinds of things [experiences]. I don't know when this happened. They had a German. The war was kind of getting to the end and they had him work in the kitchen so it wouldn't take one of us [fellows]. It seemed like the bread was slipping out on them. They [thought] that [fellow] might be taking some. And sure enough he was taking a loaf of bread every day. That was shorting us. They caught him. I can't remember what they did with him, but he was crying. He said, "My family is starving. We can't get anything to eat." But I don't know what they did to him?

RB: Were you there when the war ended?

SF: Yes.

RB: What do you remember about that?

SF: I have been [at] every damn place in the world, but where they dropped that atomic bomb. What is the name?

RB: Japan.

SF: Japan. I believe I have been in every damn place, but that. They dropped that [bomb] and killed a whole bunch of people, lots of them. Boy, they threw in the towel.

RB: The Germans were defeated before the Japanese.

SF: Yes.

RB: After [Adolf] Hitler was defeated, where did you go?

SF: That damn crazy [fellow] had that all figured out and some of those others too. They never did find him.

RB: Did you ship home from France or from England?

SF: We could just come across. It didn't take us long because the war [was over].

RB: Were there a bunch of ships coming back to the States at the same time?

SF: Yes. They were getting people out as fast as they could.

RB: Where did you land here? Did you go to the East coast somewhere?

SF: No. They gave me a first chance to go and I went. I had my buddy [who] I usually spent any time [with]. I had to go in and he was a supply sergeant. Toward the end I was talking to him there. The other [fellow] came up with the mail. "Frei, you just as well take your letter too. You got one." So he handed it to me. The sergeant threw his in the junk [trash]. Afterwards I said, "What the hell are you doing?" He said, "You know we aren't going to get out of here. I am married with a [child]. She sends letters, but she says I have never answered her because I know we are not going to go home." I don't know what happened after I left. The other group took another three months to get out. So he evidently made it, but whether he looked for his wife or not, I don't know.

RB: I understand. [Did] you make it back home? [Did] you take a train home or what?

SF: We took a ship. We went to England and took a ship. We could look over and see —.

RB: Did you make it to New York [City, New York]?

SF: Yes.

RB: Did you see the Statue of Liberty?

SF: That is what I was trying to think of.

RB: I thought maybe you were thinking of that. You saw that?

SF: Yes. We were up from it.

RB: Was that a nice feeling to feel like you were coming home? [Laughter]

SF: Yes. We could see it, but the big ships couldn't get too close. We weren't long getting here. Then my wife came up.

RB: Did you go to Salt Lake [City]?

SF: Yes.

RB: [Did] she come to meet you?

SF: Yes.

RB: Was that a nice reunion?

SF: Yes. She had to get back out because I had to stay there for a few days. We were lined up there. One of the [fellows] came out and said, "We would like you to sign your name and help if you [are] needed to take men anywhere." He didn't know that he was in one of the bunches that were right on the front line. They turned around and they were going to shoot him. He just threw down the [inaudible] and ran. That was all he could do, but I had been in action so I got by easy.

RB: After the war did you think much about those experiences? Did you talk about them at all with your family or your wife?

SF: No.

RB: How come?

SF: [I] just didn't want to.

RB: But now it has been almost seventy years and you can still remember those experiences?

SF: Some of them. I don't know how I made it.

RB: Do you think about that, why you were saved and some of these other men that you took care of their bodies they didn't make it? How did that make you feel?

SF: When you are around it all the time it doesn't worry you.

RB: After you came back what kind of work did you do after the war?

SF: Over in St. George they taught us some things to do to get back into circulation. I can't remember everything that was done. We didn't have anything here [in Santa Clara]. I would just [go] anywhere where I could to get a job. My wife's dad owned 258 acres up the [Snow] Canyon. I don't know how it happened, but all at once movies started to come in [and] they went up that canyon. I had a [fellow] come in [from] Cedar [City, Iron County, Utah] checking on me. You know that they can't go on without connecting with them [power lines]. I said, "I am sure that line is where that fence is down there. I didn't know for sure [that] it was or not." It wasn't, but I didn't know it until after the war. After that, they came in to make movies.

RB: Did you help with that?

SF: You betcha! I was one [who] did [worked on the movies]. Clark Gable [was one of the movie stars].

RB: Did you see some of the movie stars?

SF: Yes. We had Clark Gable there. He couldn't control his body to do anything. I don't know what [happened to him]. I had a lot of pull around there because I owned the place. I said to, I think, Clark Gable, "I can cure you just as sure as hell." He said, "Well, I guess I can try it." I told him what [I] was going to do. Instead of coming on a bus or something we went in his car and went around to Ivins [Washington County, Utah] —

SF: —and then down to Santa Clara [Washington County, Utah]. We headed out there to where the city building is now. We were just across the street. We had a little fruit stand there. I told him, "I am going to get one of those little [containers] that they put the cherries in."

RB: Like a basket?

SF: Yes. I said, "You are going to eat this now, all of it, then we are going to go like hell because you are going to have a change." He said, "It won't make [any] difference." We got down there and, by hell, I think we went into the night for something. I don't know why. I stayed with him because I knew what those cherries were going to do to him.

RB: Was he going to have to go to the bathroom?

SF: Yes. It cleaned him out. It cleaned him out. The [fellow who] that takes care of your money, the time you work, came over and said, "I have to disconnect [lay you off] you. You are getting too much money here." Clark Gable stepped up and said, "If you say another damn word you are the one [who] is going to get out of here." [What] I felt bad about [was that] he went right ahead with his getting it done. Then they sent him over, see. I lost him.

RB: You saved him that day.

SF: If it would have been any other [fellow] than me, they would [have fired him] because they couldn't. I was on my property. I found out years later that I wasn't on my property. Some of it I was, but it wasn't down [at] the fence where I thought it was up.

RB: Let me ask you a question. When they were doing the atomic bomb testing in Nevada in the 1950s, did you ever see any of that?

SF: Say it again.

RB: The [United States] Government was doing atomic bomb testing. Did you ever see any of those flashes or experience any of that?

SF: No.

RB: Some people around here did. They were called the down winders.

SF: Two of them [received] money from the government. They are still getting it.

RB: It didn't affect you?

SF: Thousands and thousands of dollars.

RB: I appreciate you spending time with us this morning and telling some of your experiences. Anything else that you want to add?

SF: I can't remember. I am blind on top of that. I can see your figure.

RB: I appreciate your time. We will just go ahead and close right now. I do want to ask you a couple of questions about your family, if you can help me. Maybe I can talk to your wife. We can fill out the paperwork. Today is February fifth.

SF: February fifth? It is going to be summer before you know it.

BF: I would say it is going to be Christmas before you know it.

SF: Coming out to make pictures and I was just in a good position. That is where I got my money from.

BF: It is good money.

SF: The boys did it for me, [but] I bought some apartments over there. It cost a hell of a lot of money.

BF: I can imagine.

SF: They were four or five years old when I bought them. Everything was good, but only about half of them were rented. I think they [rented for] \$125.00 a month at that time. That was a lot of money. That doesn't count now. Two different times we had to — you couldn't get any money or anything. We were in a — what do you call it?

BF: Recession?

SF: Yes. The only thing that saved my life was I had made some money and I forgot I had it. I had it in my account and that is what saved my life.

BF: You had to dip on your savings?

SF: Yes, two different times. Now, we have them waiting to get in on the apartments. We have thirty — I don't even know how many we have. [Laughter] But we have had a long old go of it.

BF: All that kind of life is dying out.

SF: You start to see changes over there, too.

BF: I have been down here for three years. They have done all sorts of everything, even the three years I have been down here.

SF: I don't worry about it anymore.

BF: It gets to a point where you just can't.

SF: Everything is paid for.

BF: That is great. Not many people can say that.

RB: In order to put this in the archive I need to ask you if we can get your consent to do that.

SF: Put it where?

RB: If we can put this interview at the library and keep it in case somebody wants to read about World War II from your experiences. Would you be willing to let us do that?

SF: I guess. I don't know. I can't remember a lot of things.

RB: What you did remember was [very] good [and] I appreciate it.

BF: I have studied the war for fourteen of my twenty-one years and I have never heard of Germans burning dead bodies in trucks. I have heard just about everything.

RB: Can you sign this paper? Can you see to sign your name? This is just a release form. Here is your wife coming in.

SF: You better ask her. I don't know.

[END OF RECORDING TWO. END OF INTERVIEW.]