

Small-town war veterans share stories

BY JESSICA RAPP
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When Kirksville resident Charles Elam joined the Navy in 1943, he said he was surprised to find it was different than what he expected — he didn't sail the high seas like the propaganda advertised.

Nevertheless, his false first impressions didn't discourage him from enlisting during World War II, and like many others at that time, Elam went to fight.

Also like many others, he returned with a story.

Elam and fellow Kirksville veterans William Minor and Gerald Crow share the bond of fighting for their country and each have their own story to tell.

William Minor

William Minor's WWII experience jumped from one small coincidence to the next.

After finishing his degree, Minor joined the Civilian Pilot Training Program at Truman, earned a pilot's license and joined the Army Reserve Air Corps. Then he joined the Cadet Program for pre-flight in Montgomery, Ala.

As a cadet, he was selected to learn to fly P-40s and P-51s in Florida. Minor said he survived a harrowing tropical storm and broken hydraulic lines on separate occasions when flying the P-40s.

Following the P-51s, Minor was trained to fly the B-24, a four-engine plane that he said was sometimes called "The Liberator."

"As it turned out, my squadron commander was Jimmy Stewart, the movie star," he said. "So I got well acquainted with him. As a matter of fact, he's the one that gave me the basic instruction on the B-24s."

Soon after, Minor said the Navy sent his regimen overseas

to travel through Africa on an initial route to England that would precede an air mission to Germany. On Jan. 5, 1944, his 10-man air mission to Kiel, Germany, came to a sudden halt when Nazi "Luftwaffes" began to shoot them down from all sides.

"[One fighter] was so close ... that I could see his face smiling as he was shooting," Minor said.

He said he had to jump out of his burning plane, and he landed near a sand bar in the North Sea at low tide. What Minor suspected to be a group of Hitler Youth boys waited for them at the shore.

Minor traveled from camp to camp as a POW for over a year until the Nazis announced that the Americans in the camps had to be either evacuated or killed. The Nazi commander of Minor's camp instead decided to leave and put the Americans in charge of the camp.

When the first wave of American troops came in, they brought cattle from the German fields to provide Minor's camp with the food they hadn't received in a long time. Sometimes, their taste of freedom was hard to handle.

"Some people over-ate because they hadn't had much to eat, and they died from overeating," he said.

When Minor returned home, he stayed in the service for almost 30 years, and he took up teaching practical arts courses at the University, starting the former practical arts major.

His years at the University, combined with some of his own research, led him to discover of many people who had shared similar experiences to his own.

For instance, Minor located the man who saw his plane blow up in Germany. He said the man had kept pieces of the shrapnel



Kirksville resident Charles Elam displays a plaque recognizing his service. In 1943, Elam enlisted in the Marine Corps at age 17, then shipped out as a member of a crew which set up radar installations on highly strategic islands such as Guadalcanal.

from the plane and gave them to Minor when they later met. Minor said he also has been emailing a former Nazi Luftwaffe pilot who found a picture of the man who shot Minor down over the North Sea.

Minor has ancestors who served in the Revolutionary War, a son — a former University student — who declared himself as a "conscientious objector" of the Vietnam War (thus pardoned from going overseas) and a grandson who recently returned from service in Iraq.

Gerald Crow

Crow's passion for his country led him to enlist after graduating from high school.

"I had wanted to go during the war," Crow said. "I believed in it ... because Hitler was trying to conquer the world. Two or three of my buddies enlisted. ... It was all so close to home."

However, every time Crow

went to enlist they turned him away. His poor vision in one eye kept him from passing the tests. Finally, when he turned 18 on May 27, 1946, they drafted him to St. Louis to be sworn in at Jefferson Barracks.

From there, he was sent to Fort Leavenworth, Kan., where he did medical basic training for eight weeks and then to Fort Knox, Ky., where he did another eight weeks of infantry basic training.

Crow said his next assignment offered him a choice: He could stay where he was and drive a truck or drive the tanks on a volunteer mission at a fort in Los Alamos, N.M. He said the mission was volunteer-only because of the possibility of exposure. In Los Alamos, a group of scientists were working on the development of the atomic bomb.

"I said, 'What am I going to be doing when I get out there?' and they said, 'You've made excellent ratings in heavy weapons,' ... and I said, 'OK, I'll go to New Mexico,'" Crow said. "They sent me out there on a train, ... and the heaviest thing I got a hold of was a .45 [caliber] pistol."

Crow's duty strictly consisted of keeping guard outside the facilities. He said no one told the soldiers why they had to guard the place or what kind of activity went on inside.

"I know somebody tried to break in," he said. "They'd come up the side of the mountain and ... they tried to cut in to get something in there. ... I know they called us out. ... They'd drop us off some place and we had automatic rifles, and they said 'Don't ask any questions, if you see somebody, shoot 'em.'"

On April 6, 1947, Crow was discharged from his position and returned to work in Kirksville. In 1949, he joined the Reserves hoping to earn some extra money. At the start of the Korean War, he spent time reopening an army barracks in Wisconsin.

"All of a sudden we got a notice saying we were going to Camp Stoneman, California," he said. "Well, we figured right then that we were going to Korea."

Instead, the 347th replacement battalion was sent to Bremerhaven, Germany, where

they assisted incoming and outgoing American soldiers. He said he continued his service until 1952 when he went home on emergency leave because of the birth of his child.

Soon after, Crow was relieved from active duty in 1964, at which time he started civil service work for the U.S. Engineers, four years before his son decided to join the army.

In September of 1969, a few days before his son left for Vietnam, Crow said he received a phone call.

"He called me from the state of Washington and said he lost his orders," Crow said. "He said, 'Dad, I don't have my orders yet, but they're shipping me out in the morning, I'm going across. ... They told me they'd [the orders] would catch up with me sometime, and I'd find them over there.'"

"Then, he was killed on the 11th day of October, he was 20 years old. ... We never did get the [orders]."

Crow said he believes the war today varies greatly from the wars he experienced, and he hopes that the soldiers in Iraq will be brought home.

"I don't think we should've ever been over there," he said.

"I think it's a shame that we're over there, and so many people get killed and not accomplishing anything. If they have one casualty, it's too many. ... It [is] kind of like the Desert Storm [situation]."

Charles "Bud" Elam

When Elam graduated from high school in Clark County in February of 1943, he knew he wanted to join the Navy.

After completing nearly 24 weeks of naval, radar and combat training, he was assigned to ARGUS Unit 5 and eventually sent overseas to Guadalcanal, where they did practice landings and set up radar coverage for incoming aircraft and ships.

Elam and his unit spent the first part of their mission with the invasion of Bougainville Island, a place where he said he "got his first real taste of war." He said the enemy there was stubborn and well-reinforced, and everything they did there was kept secret.

Elam said that when he wrote letters home, he found a way around the heavy censorship.

"I'd write home — a letter home — to my folks and try to partially explain what we were doing, and it would be literally slit to pieces," Elam said. "When I came home on leave, we'd try to establish a little family code. I'd ask about Aunt Martha, and I didn't have an Aunt Martha. That meant I was in a certain place. It was kind of fun."

Elam called some of his war experiences exciting while others he called coincidental. For instance, he said he left his high school for WWII never expecting to see his friends again and facing the inevitability of homesickness. Yet, during a voyage in the canal, he happened to notice a ship near-

by whose spotter was a close friend from high school. He also found another reminder of school while spending downtime listening to the radio.

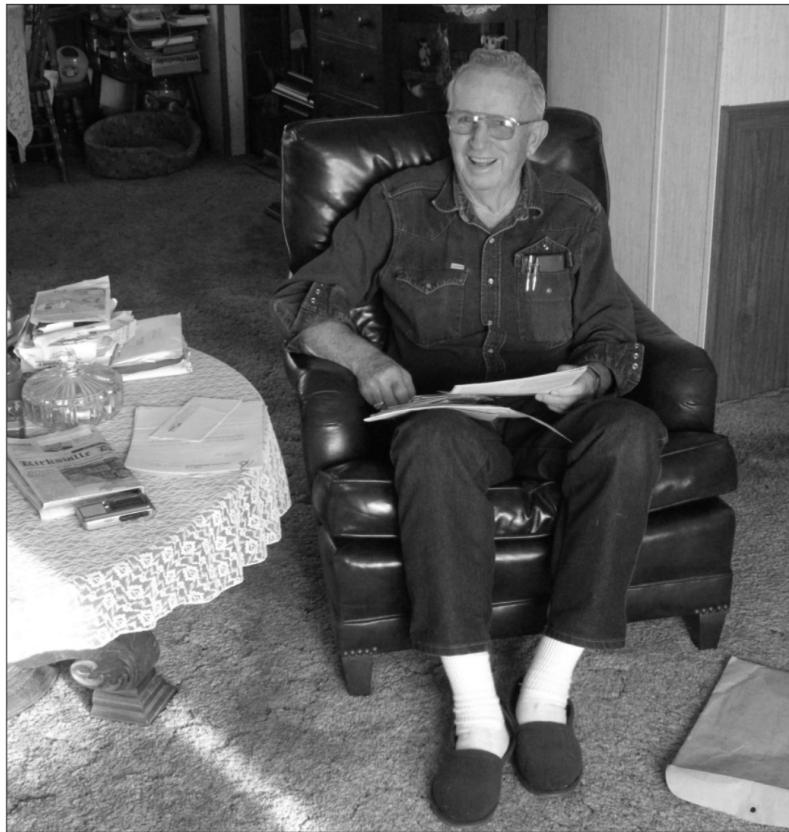
"We were bobbing along one night and it was rough seas and misty out, kind of home-

sick-type weather, and we were in this radio room," he said. "It gave the score of the football team of Kirksville State Teacher's College. Boy, that brought me a little closer to home."

After being discharged from the Navy, Elam took a job teaching business education and speech courses at Elvira High School. He later became admission counselor and then director of admission at the University. He retired after 30 years in 1984.

Looking back on the war, Elam said he believes that the soldiers fought for a just cause and that he still believes that applies today.

"My patriotism from that day has run so deep in this country, and I can appreciate it so much, from that perspective, that I just can't understand some of today's activities against military and the flag," he said. "We have so much in this country to be so thankful for. I don't like to see it ever jeopardized."



Veteran Gerald Crow resides in his hometown of Kirksville after serving in both WWII and Vietnam. Crow played football for the Atomic Bombers in Los Alamos, N.M.

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