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Interview no. 805

Irvin Steele

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Irvin Steele
INTERVIEWER: Jeff Georges
PROJECT: World War II
DATE OF INTERVIEW: December 1, 1993
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
TAPE NO: 805
TRANSCRIPT NO: 805
TRANSCRIBER: _____

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

El Paso native; retired Navy pilot; active in Boy Scouts since 1940's.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Extensive discussion of role of Boy Scouts in civilian activities in El Paso; explains nature of Boy Scouts and their operation; recalls family's role in World War II; sentiments about return of brothers from the War.

Length of Interview: 50 minutes Length of Transcript 6 pages

Interview with Irvin Steele
By Jeff Georges
December 1, 1993

G: This is an interview with Irvin Steele in El Paso, Texas on December 1, 1993. Okay, I thought we'd start off with some personal information. When and where were you born?

S: El Paso. I was born in 1936, September 8, on Jackson Street.

G: What did your parents do?

S: My father at the time was a plumber. And he has been a soldier of fortune and half a dozen other things - prize fighter, chauffeur, and all those things that they did back then to make a living. But he owned a plumbing company at the time.

G: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

S: I have a lot of brothers and sisters, lots and lots of...
(interruption)

G: We're talking about your brothers and sisters.

S: I have a whole bunch of them. Do you want the immediate family or the extended family?

G: Go for the immediate.

S: Then there's ten of us. Seven brothers and three sisters.

G: Older than you, younger?

S: Most of them are older than me. I guess I'd be the seventh child. There's three younger than I am.

G: Did you have other brothers that served in the army?

S: We're a five-star family.

G: Five-star family?

S: All the older boys served at the same time in all the different corps. We had one in the Air Force, one in the Army - the Air Force was the Army Air Force at the time - one in the Marine Corps, one in the Navy, and one in the Navy Navy. The one that was in the Marine Corp was a Navy Corpsman, because only Navy Corpsmen served in the Marine Corps and they'd keep their Navy rank.

G: Where were you when you heard about the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

S: Well, we were at the big house and we were all sitting around listening to the radio and we began the day by listening about the war and Sparky and read the funny papers and then had brunch and then it was sometime between eleven [a.m] and twelve [p.m.], or once the brunch was finished, and the big radio started announcing that Pearl Harbor was being bombed and attacked by planes of the Japanese empire. That kind of shocked everyone and we gathered around the radio and listened to as much as we could gather at that time. And there were several broadcasts during the day. It became more and more evident how severe it was the later in the day it got and they had more time to evaluate. And then the next day, or the day after - I'm not sure whether it was one or two days later - that the Day of Infamy Speech was taking place. And we listened to that on the same set, all of us together listening to the speech by President Roosevelt, [that] there was a state

of war existing. And it's called the Day of Infamy Speech, I believe, because that's what the big phrase was. And that was all done as one big family unit because my father had been a major in the artillery and he knew what that meant better than most of us. And he gathered his older boys together to listen to what was going on. And I think the family's older boys and my mother had gathered together and determined who was going to go and who was going to go now and later and what corps they were going to go into. And the older boy, Roy, went into the Army and Jimmy was a Marine Corpsman. And then Rusty was in the Army Air Force and Little Ralph was [in the] Navy and Alfred, I think, he was in the Army, but I wasn't sure.

And that's the five stars on our flag we used to have out on the front window. [It was] gold and blue and red and lots of little frills all over. I think it was white in there too, I remember. White and blue and gold I think it was. The stars were actually blue. So it was very pretty. And when people would meet you'd hear them talking, "I'm a three-star family," or "I'm a two-star family," and that gave the number of kids they had in the War at the time. That used to be a big topic of conversation of who had how many stars. I don't know why that was so important, but parents are that way you know. And we had brothers in almost all the theatres too. Roy was in the China-Burma area and Tinsie, who was Jimmy, was island-hopping because he was in the Marine Corps. Rusty was in Australia flying medium bombers and he slipped in the

shower and broke his shoulder. And so he was taken out of Officer Flight School and became a radio gunner because he lost total movement in his arm. He couldn't go through all the motions. His arm's still good and all that but he couldn't make all the motions so he had to be dropped from the pilot school.

And Ralph, I never did know what Ralph did in the Navy, but I knew he flew around an awful lot with some very important people. One time he landed here in El Paso on a four-engine aircraft and he was the only one on it and got off as if he was a VIP. To this day, I don't know what his purpose was. And Alfred - I know that he was in the Corps someplace - but we had very little information from Alfred. I think they ended up in Europe. I think he just served some place in Italy or some place like that - North Africa/Italy/Sicily [in] that campaign. So I had a little bit of everywhere - mostly in the Pacific though.

G: Okay, being too young to be in the service how did you feel about the news of the bombing?

S: I had a cold chill strike me because my father had raised us all to be hunters. We were very accustomed to what weapons did. We were all excellent hunters, excellent marksmen. And he had told us that it was our duty and responsibility to serve our nation if it came time and we grew up with that knowledge. He also told us that it was no picnic. And he used to tease us that if they gave us a helmet and two dog

tags that it was impossible to get our entire body behind those three items. And so he was saying that it was a dangerous game. You could actually could get very severely hurt. So all of us had a pretty good understanding. That was the case. And I guess I knew that my brothers would leave and since we were a very close-knit family it was chilling to me to realize that the life we had known as a family would be changed and altered. I seemed to know from the beginning that it would be forever. It would never be the same when we came back and I knew that my brothers would never be the same. And they weren't. Each one of them came back affected quite differently from the War.

Probably the one that reflected the War the least would be Ralph, probably because he had it what seemed to me very easy. He was in the Navy and must not have been shot at too many times because he never had any effects that I could see at all. Whereas, let's see, Jimmy would wake up in the middle of the night screaming and I was an adult before I was allowed to find out why. And Roy became quite moody and quiet because of the things he had seen in the China-Burma area. And Rusty didn't talk much about what was going on where he was because he had lost so many of his good friends there. I guess if you ever followed the air war in the islands with the small bombers, the 25's, the A-20's, the 26's, the double-engine bombers, they were called Biscuit Bombers because they actually delivered rations for the men to eat as well as

bombs. And they had a terrible time right at first because the bombs that they were dropping at the altitude that they were dropping would go off and the second or third plane would be catching fragments from the bombs. And they finally had to learn to slow them down with parachutes or something or put drags so the planes could clear before the things detonated. And he, I guess, remembered alot of that. That's why he didn't talk much about it.

G: Okay, were you in the Cub Scouts before the War?

S: I was with the scouts, Boy Scouts and Cub Scouts, and I remember all the different drives that we went on. Gee, there was so many things that we did. And they were mainly interested in what our troops and packs did. Well, we were involved in a lot of drives to help the war effort.