

Interview of  
Eino Parkkila:  
World War II Veteran

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### Interview

During the term, I have been preparing a report. This report is a biography of a person who had, somehow, contributed to World War II. This person happens to be my grandfather, Eino Parkkila of Sundell, Michigan. In this paper, I will give a detailed account of his life. I will talk about his early life in Alger county before the war. I will describe his experiences of World War II as he saw them, going through all the major campaigns of the war. Finally, I will talk about his post-war activities, including jobs and marriage, and tell you what he is doing today. He is a man whom I admire greatly, for what he has done. If he had not survived, I would not be here today.

Eino Parkkila was born on January 29, 1915 in Chatham, Michigan, the son of the late Daniel and Ida Parkkila. He grew up on a small farm in Eben, Michigan with three brothers and two sisters. His parents emigrated from Finland and that is the only language they spoke when he was a child. Working on a farm demanded a large amount of time, so Eino quit school after finishing the 7th grade. He was an avid outdoorsman and shot his first buck at the young age of nine. Before the war he worked for Bud Wheel and Utilite, the former making wheels and the latter as a welder.

Eino Parkkila was drafted on September 9, 1942. He received his training at Camp Kroft in South Carolina. There he spent a little over five months of intensive training to prepare him for combat. He had no choice of duty, whether it be the Pacific or European theaters. He was assigned to the 9th Infantry Division of the US Army II Corps. It was with this division that he spent most of his service.

His first campaign was in North Africa. General Dwight D. Eisenhower led an Allied expeditionary force in Operation Torch, the invasion of French North Africa on November 8, 1942. Parkkila would not see action in North Africa until the end of January, 1943 because of his training. Oddly his troop ship over to Algeria was not escorted. I found this strange, but later read convoys were not often used until March of 1943 when Allied High Command had assigned duties for all Allied shipping in the Atlantic Ocean. Parkkila saw most of his action in Northern Tunisia. The US II Corps, including 9th Infantry, had orders to secure suitable positions for the attack on Bizerta, a town north of Tunis. They were to wait for British 1st Army and capture the town. This happened in May of 1943. Parkkila contracted malaria during this battle. He spent three days and three nights in the hills south of Bizerta without sleep, waiting for supplies to catch up, and all the while engaging the Germans. This offensive in Tunisia led to complete German withdrawal from North Africa.

His next campaign was on Sicily. General George S. Patton led the 7th Army against Palermo in western Sicily, while the British under Field Marshall Montgomery were to attack the

Messina Peninsula. The actual invasion was tougher than capturing the island. My grandfather's unit did not participate in the invasion, but was held in reserve. He did participate in the capture of Palermo which he said was not really even a battle. According to him, the 300 Italians they encountered there were reluctant to fight and gave up with hardly any bloodshed. Even so, Patton gained great recognition because of Palermo. The Allied invasion of Sicily began on July 10, 1943 and ended with total occupation on August 17th, 39 days later.

Orders from the Allied High Command cut short Parkkila's stay in Sicily. The 9th Infantry Division was ordered back to England in preparation for the second front at Normandy, along with several other divisions including the 82nd Airborne, 1st Infantry Division, 2nd Armoured, and a few British Divisions. My grandfather, therefore, saw no action in Italy itself.

On June 6, 1944, Normandy was invaded, starting the second front, which Germany knew was coming and Russia had long requested. Eino Parkkila's unit landed on shore on June 9th to reinforce American units already there. The American objective was to cut off the Cherbourg Peninsula and capture Cherbourg, which was an excellent harbor for supplies and reinforcements. The 9th Infantry Division was the first unit to cross the peninsula. Cherbourg was capture on June 27th. During this offensive, Lieutenant General Lesley J. McNair, commander of the U.S. Army Ground Forces was killed by a misdirected bomb from a U.S. plane. A strong jet stream had caused the bombs of a

trailing plane to stray off target and hit the tent McNair was in. My grandfather witnessed the explosion which killed McNair. The French town of Saint Lo fell on July 18th, which opened the door for Allied troops to sweep across France.

Parkkila's unit saw weak opposition in the next campaign he fought; Northern France. His tour was cut short for an eight-day furlough in London. He stayed in a hotel. The Germans still held much of Northern France and this was where most of the German V-weapon sites were. During a raid my grandfather, who was on the 5th floor, was instructed to go to the bomb shelter. He refused, but later changed his mind when an incendiary bomb blew up his bathroom when he was in bed. He just figured no bombs would hit the hotel. During his stay he was required to take target practice before the watchful eyes of superior officers. The officers commented on why my grandfather could not keep a steady aim and perhaps he had seen too much action and was stressed out. Both of his arms shook. He still achieved the highest score in his company. They assumed that was just natural for him and it was, even after the war whenever he would fire a gun. Afterwards, he realised he would have been sent home if he had just shot his rifle into the ground. Shortly, he was sent back to France. The 9th Division had captured a Finnish soldier in the German army. Parkkila was the only one who could be an interpreter. The man could not speak German or English. He asked the prisoner questions about troop movements and positions which the prisoner was happy to give. Finland was on the Axis side in the first part of the war, and I was curious what other

soldiers would think of my grandfather being of Finnish origin. He said they did not care because many of his fellow soldiers were from the Upper Peninsula and they too were Finnish.

On December 16, 1944, Hitler began his last German offensive in the Ardennes forest. Called the Battle of the Bulge, the objective was to split the American and British forces and capture the Belgian town of Antwerp. It would take months for the Allies to regain the lost territory and it would give the Germans a chance to suppress the onslaught of the Russians in Poland. At this time, Parkkila was in the Ardennes. The Allied headquarters knew a German attack was coming but they didn't know where. The 9th Infantry Division was ordered to hold their part of the forest at all costs. In the middle of winter, waste-deep in snow, the 9th Infantry was entrenched. For three weeks they waited for the attack, but only light fire was encountered and no ground was lost. Sleeping in the snow is just one example of what the men who fought for our country endured. To put it simpler, my grandfather told me to envision digging a 7-foot hole in my back yard and sit in it, in the middle of winter for three weeks.

His next campaign was in the Rhineland. This iron and coal-rich territory held the Rhine River, the final obstacle the Americans and British would face to enter Germany. The Germans had failed to destroy the Ludendorff Bridge at Remagen when most of their charges failed to explode. The 1st Army, including the 9th Infantry, was ordered to hold the bridge intact to allow the advancing 3rd Army, with their armoured divisions, to cross the

bridge into Germany. A no-fly zone was created so that no planes could threaten the bridge. Any planes flying near it were to be shot down, even Allied planes. The Germans didn't know this, and tried to fly captured Allied planes over it. All were shot down.

Eino Parkkila's final campaign was called on his discharge paper Central Europe. With American and British forces to the west and Russian armies to the east, the Third Reich's days were numbered. Germany finally surrendered on May 7th, 1945. My grandfather commented on the meeting of Russian forces. The American and British had reached the Elbe river in Germany. They knew the Russians were on the other side, but they had no idea if the signals they received were from Russians or Germans playing tricks. Fortunately, it was the Russian army and everyone knew the war would soon be over.

The war in Europe was over but the horrible truths were just beginning. Hitler had murdered six million Jews and Parkkila experience the aftermath of the Holocaust. Each town they captured in Germany, he saw these poor people, barely able to walk. They had not eaten for a long time and their muscles had deteriorated from their bodies. Shocked, several units, including my grandfather's, gave them canned C-rations. They were so hungry they tore at the cans, trying to open them with their fingers until they bled. The atrocities committed by Hitlers fanatics outraged many Allied soldiers and some had to be detained to stop summary executions of random prisoners.

In late-August, Eino Parkkila was going back to the United States. A point system based on service was used to determine

whether a soldier was able to fly home or be shipped home. A soldier needed 85 points to fly home. Parkkila had 115. Unfortunately he got the mumps and spent three weeks in a London hospital. He wanted to fly but ended up taking one of the last troop ships back to the States. Before the Japanese had surrendered he was asked if he wanted to go to the Pacific, but he refused and was honorably discharged on September 23, 1945 from the U.S. Army.

Looking at his discharge papers, I was astonished at where he had been and what he had accomplished. During his three years in the service, he had attained the rank of corporal. He was part of a heavy-weapons company and his military occupational specialty was "Heavy Machine Gunner". He received several decorations and citations while on active duty. He received a Good Conduct Medal, District Unit Badge, 1st Bronze Oak Leaf Cluster, and a European-African, Middle Eastern Theater Ribbon with 1 Silver Battle Star and 2 Bronze Battle Stars. The only wounds he received were slight bruises from shrapnel. According to him, machine gunners were priority targets for German sharpshooters.

I asked him questions on a more personal level about the war: was he ever afraid of dying, what were his fellow soldiers like, did he want to go to war? I got a first-hand picture of what war was really like. He was never afraid. To quote my grandfather; "it was either him or me", comparing German soldiers to American. A majority of his fellow soldiers were homesick. He gave me an example of this in describing an incident when he



was in France. Ordered to guard a hedge along a road, his assistant machine gunner spoke of his eagerness to go back to the States. He showed my grandfather a picture of his girlfriend, whom he planned to marry when he got back. Five minutes later his brains and blood were in Parkkila's lap. My grandfather did not want to go to war, but it was his duty, as a defender of freedom, to go to Europe.

After the war, coming home was a new experience. He did not know what to do. The war was his life for the past three years and adjusting to civilian life would have to be endured. In 1947, he married Viola Pulkkinen of Sundell, Michigan with whom he raised two daughters. In the post-war years he held jobs as a welder at Ecolite, as a bulldozer operator, a mechanic, a charter fisherman, as well as a farmer. His job he would have the longest was for the Alger County Road Commission from which he retired from in 1977 at the age of 62. His wife, Viola died in February of 1975.

Today he is living in Sundell; the place he has lived at for the past 44 years. He spends a good deal of time playing cards with friends and relative, especially me who he has the most trouble winning at cribbage. He never remarried, but had a long relationship with an Alice Goin of Eben, who died in 1987. Even after her death, her children still visit him weekly.

Eino Parkkila's war record is amazing. Before the war, he was just an average son of immigrant parents. After the war, he was, in my opinion, a hero. The copy of his discharge papers, which I have attached to this report, is my proof of his

experiences. I admire him for what he has done, and I would have done the same thing in the same situations. I credit him for my vast interest in World War II, and I credit him for bringing my mother into the world. If not for him and millions of other Eino Parkkilas in the United States our country would not be where it is today.

## Bibliography

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Note:

Besides the corrections from the rough draft, I added a couple things and changed accounts which were incorrect. My grandfather will soon be 80 years old. He doesn't hear very well and I found some inconsistencies with what he had told me. Last weekend I talked to him again and straightened them out.