It is truly an amazing experience to hear a bit of history from a first hand source. The insight and experiences of a World War II veteran are stories to be cherished and remembered. My grandfather, Dwain Lange, served in World War II as part of the Air Corp in the Army. Most of the interview questions became obsolete as the stories flowed from his memory.

Lange, as he is now called by everyone because of his military stint, entered the military as a volunteer in 1942. He said he agreed with the decision to go to war, and “Everyone at that time did.” His training began in Waco, Texas; and continued until October of 1942. From there, Lange joined the 53rd troop carrier squadron in the 61st group of the Air Corp, and was then transferred to Camp Shanks in New York. I was greatly affected by the way he spoke of his departure to overseas. He said the feeling of boarding the boat was unlike any other he had ever had. The fear was consuming, and he did not know if he would ever come back alive.

The trip overseas was made in a boat that was not guarded by naval vessels, which made all of the troops nervous because of the stories of German submarines. Each day they had a drill to wake them that called all men to their battle stations, and they never knew when it was a legitimate attack. Lange’s boat took the squadron to Casablanca, French Morocco in Africa. There his squadron became part of the glider section. They spent their time putting gliders together, making adjustments, and doing practice runs. Soon after landing, they assembled the gliders and flew to Tunisia where they prepared for the invasion of Sicily.
Lange’s squadron invaded Sicily on July 9, 1943, although no gliders were used. They dropped paratroopers into the area using regular planes, and he worked on the ground crew. During this invasion, the Navy mistook the squadron’s planes for Germans and shot several down, but no one was killed. Sicily was taken by August 12, 1943, and Lange said they all thought the war would go quickly and easily.

The squadron used the new base in Sicily to prepare for the invasion of Italy. On September 9, 1943, Lange again worked on the ground crew that flew and dropped paratroopers into Italy. After the paratroopers were dropped, the squadron was responsible for supplying the ground soldiers and picking up the wounded to take back to Algeria. The ground troops advanced, and his squadron made base in Naples, Italy to continually fly supplies to the Army.

Lange continued to work on the ground crew, but his glider section was also practicing most of the days. They made modifications and practice runs to test the new ideas, like adding parachutes to the back. Once in Sicily, Lange was on a practice glider run when the glider broke loose from the plane too soon. He had to make an emergency landing, and stay there to guard the glider all night until someone came to pick it up. All of the practice made the squadron precise, but they had yet to use the gliders in the war.

In early 1944, the squadron was next ordered to Scotland, then to England to prepare for the invasion of Normandy. Lange said they spent all of their time training during the day, and then had a lot of freedom at night. The soldiers could go into town, and he even dated a British girl while there. Soon, the squadron was back into regular action. On June 5, 1944, Lange and several others were called to paint black and white stripes on all of the aircrafts, so they could be identified from captured German planes that might be in the upcoming battle.
The main invasion began on June 6, 1944, as Lange’s squadron dropped paratroopers from the 101st airborne division early in the morning. He was on the ground crew again, and continued to work on supplying the Army. Lange’s division lost three planes on D-Day. Two of which, the crew survived, and one lost the entire crew. He choked up a little while speaking of the third plane and it was easy to see how hard those days were for the members of the military.

After the initial invasion of Normandy, the squadron had the same jobs of supplying and picking up the wounded until the middle of 1944. In September, the squadron used the gliders to make a drop into Holland. There were 43,000 gliders and planes involved with three divisions of the now Allied Airborne Army because there were British divisions as well. Lange said it was not a very successful mission, although he said the Americans did what they should have and the British failed.

After the Holland mission, Lange’s squadron set up base in France, where they stayed for the rest of the war. They dropped paratroopers into the Battle of the Bulge once the weather was clear, and continued to carry supplies and wounded until the German surrender in May of 1944. After the war, the troops were told to pile all of their possessions, and they were given new uniforms. Lange’s squadron was put on a boat in the Atlantic and given free run of the ship. But the boat did not take him home. He woke up in South America one morning, in British Guinea. The Army wanted to use a base here as a drop point for soldiers going home. He was stationed at an air field in the middle of a jungle with no roads. The only route to town was down the river. Here Lange became a CQ, Charge of Quarters. He had to answer phones, wake the soldiers, and other minor duties. Lange said he had easy duty in South America, and the base had the luxuries of a swimming pool, movie theatres, and
stores, but he was still far from home. He finally got his call to go home in September of 1945 after being gone for three years.

After the story of the actual war experiences, I asked him how it affected his family, how it changed him and what opportunities it brought him. He said his family said very little. Communication was slow, although he did receive letters almost every week from friends and family. His parents just knew it was something he had to do, and his brother was in the military as well, although not overseas. Lange did not speak of how the experiences of the war changed him personally, but stuck to changes like his name and appearance. After being addressed by only his last name in the service, he stayed with that through out the rest of his life. Also, his hair color went from red to blonde while in Africa, and never changed back.

Lange said the war did change him, but mostly with his new opportunities. He met my grandmother through the war. She was married to a friend of his who was killed in the war, and they met up again at a military function for veterans and their wives (or widows). Lange also emphasized how he took advantage of all the opportunities given to him while he was overseas. He took the free time and off duty time to travel to Carthage, places in Italy like Pompeii, and the famous Sherwood Forest in England. However, he says his greatest opportunity was the G.I. Bill. He was able to finish college, and get a job that provided for his livelihood for the rest of his life.

This first hand view of history was incredible. I had no idea my grandfather had seen and done so much during the war, and his stories still teach a lot. The learning experience was not simply the actual story, but also the tone of voice, the emotion, and the amazing memory for detail that made me realize how impacting it must have been to live through an experience like World War II.