

Shawnee Stewart

“The call Staff Sergeant Milton S. Stewart of Sallisaw, Okla. the luckiest man in his outfit.”

—PRESS RELEASE TO RADIO STATION KOCY, OKC

Chapter: 01 - 0:54

Introduction

Announcer: Milton Shawnee Stewart served in the Army Air Corps during World War II. He became a gunner on a B26 Bomber and was assigned to the 9th Air Force in England. On his twentieth mission his plane was shot down over Germany. As he was preparing to use his parachute he broke his arm but was able to parachute to safety. Upon landing he broke his leg, while falling into the hands of German soldiers. The area later fell to Russian troops who delivered him to the American forces. He was awarded the Purple Heart for his service in World War II.

In 1950, he was elected to the Oklahoma State House of Representatives from Sequoyah County and served two terms.

He was a charter member of the Tulsa Metropolitan Planning Commission.

Shawnee Stewart was 94 when he died January 14, 2016.

And now on VoicesofOklahoma.com you can listen to Shawnee as he talks about his war experience and the scars that lasted the rest of his life.

Chapter: 02 - 4:00

Why Shawnee

John Erling: Today's date is September 24, 2009. Shawnee, state your full name and your birth date.

Shawnee Stewart: Milton Shawnee Steward. My birthday is June 13, 1921.

JE: So your age today is?

SS: Eighty-eight.

JE: How was it your parents named you Shawnee?

SS: This goes back to early day education in the rural areas in Oklahoma. We had lots of little schoolhouses out in the rural area, one every two miles. And we had to import teachers. There wasn't any hotels or apartments, they had to stay with somebody in the community.

That year I was born, the teacher was shipped in from Shawnee, Oklahoma. She stayed at our house and she was there the night I was born. She was a Kickapoo Indian, my mother tells me this, so she puts that handle on me.

JE: Well, it's a great name.

SS: Well, it's a little bit different, yeah.

JE: When you were in the service, were they taken by your name?

SS: No not really. There they used first names. Shawnee is my middle name.

JE: How did you come to use the name Shawnee instead of Milton?

SS: My family called me Shawnee, all my friends call me Shawnee.

JE: It's interesting, the woman who lived in your home was Kickapoo, and you were Cherokee.

SS: Cherokee.

JE: And you end up with a Shawnee Indian name. Where were you born?

SS: I was born in Akins, Oklahoma. That's a little town out from Sallisaw, Oklahoma, out six or eight miles. Just a little community there. When I grew up its main economy was cotton. Everybody had a cotton patch or cattle. Luckily, my dad had cattle, so I didn't have to pick cotton.

But I think another reason was being that he may have been just about like me, a little bit lazy. He didn't like to pick cotton either, so he chose cattle.

JE: How long did you live in Akins?

SS: I lived there until I went to college, and I was about nineteen, I guess, or twenty.

JE: State your parents' names.

SS: My father's name was David Clede Steward, and my mother's name was Alliebell Ezele Steward.

JE: You were married, your late wife's name?

SS: My late wife's name was Mary Jo Evans Steward. From that marriage we had a son, David Raymond Steward, and a daughter, Linda Kay Steward.

JE: You went through grade school in Akins?

SS: Yeah.

JE: And then to high school in Akins?

SS: They only had high school at Akins for about one or two years. I didn't go to high school there. I went to high school at Sallisaw, Oklahoma, which is in Sequoyah County.

JE: When did you graduate from high school?

SS: Nineteen thirty-eight.

JE: And it was in 1938, that you decided also to go on to further your education?

SS: Yes.

JE: And where did you go to college?

SS: I went to Northeastern State Teachers College at Tahlequah.

JE: In 1938, probably not everybody was going to college.

SS: Well, as many as possibly could, went, because there wasn't anything else to do. My parents always pushed education. They didn't give us much choice. I had two brothers and they didn't give any of us a choice as to whether we were going to college. We just automatically went.

JE: So it was driven by your parents?

SS: Right.

JE: That was just an expected thing, you're going to go beyond high school?

SS: And, yeah. And neither one of them went to college.

JE: But they knew the importance of it.

SS: Yes.

JE: Did you know then what you wanted to be as you went to college?

SS: Not really. I was up there three years in college before I decided what I wanted to do.

JE: What was that?

SS: Well, I ended up with Sociology and Economics. And then my masters, I got Regional and City Planning at the University of Oklahoma. But that was later.

JE: Yes.

Chapter: 03 - 4:20

The Air Force

John Erling: Along about 1941, you were still in school.

Shawnee Stewart: No, in 1941, I was in the army.

JE: When did you become a member of the army?

SS: About 1940.

JE: You left college to do that?

SS: Yes.

JE: What motivated you to join in 1940?

SS: Well, they had a draft, everybody had a number. Depending on your number you were drafted sequentially. You could go into the army, the navy, marines. I chose the air force.

JE: World War II had ongoing at that time.

SS: Yeah.

JE: So you were drafted in 1940?

SS: No I signed up, I volunteered.

JE: Oh was that because you knew you'd be drafted?

SS: I suspect, I suspect.

JE: Did you have any choices because you signed up early?

SS: Yes, I had my choice of which branch of the service I wanted to go in, so I chose the air force and it was given.

JE: Where did you go to basic training?

SS: San Antonio.

JE: Tell us how you felt back then. And were people nervous, you going to war?

SS: Well, it was the going thing then.

JE: Everybody was joining up?

SS: Everybody was joining. If you weren't in a branch of service, you were just a step away. It was just when your number came up.

JE: Yeah. So you joined the air force in 1940.

SS: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And then after basic training, what did you do?

SS: Right after basic training they send you out to some branch. For example, I worked in a Post Office a little bit. I was Assistant Fire Chief at Nellis Air Force Base. Just doing things. You do that a certain amount of time and then it becomes time to fish or cut bait. So then you choose what you want to do.

JE: So were they letting you decide then?

SS: Well, in a way they were. I figured this out later.

JE: What did you decide?

SS: I chose to be in gunnery.

JE: A gunner?

SS: A gunner, yeah.

JE: Tell us what a gunner did. What was a gunner's role?

SS: Well, every airplane has stations on it and there's so many stations for gunners on every airplane.

JE: What kind of planes were you flying?

SS: I was on an 826.

JE: How many gunners did you have on an 826?

SS: One. A pilot and a gunner.

JE: What kind of weapon were you firing?

SS: It was a .30 caliber. I had a turret down the middle, you'd look this way to look out that way.

JE: You were actually looking into a mirror, so you could look behind you.

SS: It operated four .30 caliber machine guns, yeah.

JE: How long did it take you to train for that?

SS: Oh I would say four to six months.

JE: In Texas?

SS: Some in Nevada, some in South Carolina. I did get some ground school in Texas.

JE: What happens to you then?

SS: You get on a list, I guess, as the openings come up. For example, ETO might need two hundred gunners, depending on how many they lost last week. So there was a constant turnover counting the losses while they ship in replacements.

JE: What was your first assignment?

SS: Well, my first assignment, and this gets a little bit tricky, I had trained all this time using parachutes. You know, wore a parachute. I got over in England, they said, "All right, you're on the list here to go to France. There's a plane leaving out of here next Tuesday at nine thirty. Be there. Bring all your stuff."

So I went down there and they had the plane there and everybody's getting on it. And I got on there and I didn't see any parachutes. I said, "Wait a minute here, you forgot something."

They said, "What? What do you mean?"

I said, "Well, I don't see a parachute over here."

They said, "Well, you don't use them on this plane."

So I said, "Well, all right. As long as everybody else doesn't use one, well, I won't either."

That plane took us over to France and I was assigned to a field over there just outside Paris. Things weren't all together worked out just like we wanted them to be. Because I remember sleeping in the airport, military airport, on a concrete floor that night. I got indoctrinated there in two or three or four things, all of that day and night.

JE: Yeah.

SS: But you get used to them. Every day is an indoctrination day.

Chapter: 04 - 4:00

Shawnee Becomes a Gunner

John Erling: So do you remember where you were December 7, 1941?

Shawnee Stewart: Yes, I do. I was in Las Vegas, Nevada, going to gunnery school.

JE: What was your feelings and those around you when you heard that news? How did you hear it?

SS: Oh I believe we was having a ballgame. Sunday afternoon, I believe we were having a ballgame and, you know, everybody anticipated. That stuff gets around, travels around, just talks so much that it becomes everyday.

- JE:** Yeah.
- SS:** Old stuff. You think about it a lot but it's talked quite a bit among people, people in the air force. And remember back then, it was the army air force.
- JE:** How much time after December 7, 1941, were you then finally graduated from school?
- SS:** Well, I got all this basic stuff out of the way. Got out of ground school, and I think that's ground school where I was then. Got out of ground school and then you get into training. They give you assignments, put you on a crew, and you do a lot of flying and shooting and going to school, to the point where you're going to need it.
- JE:** When they said you were ready as a gunner, what was your first assignment? You know where—
- SS:** Well, I guess the big day was when you get up there in a B-17, B-17 has some big openings on the sides. They stick these .50 calibers in there and they stick you up there, and they say, "Look out there. What do you see?"
- "Well, there's another plane going along there pulling a great, big sheet."
- They said, "Well, see if you can hit that."
- JE:** So did you have a pretty good record of hitting the sheet?
- SS:** Oh, I guess I had as good as anybody else. As long as you get within a certain distance, I forget what it was, you can see where you're shooting. Every fourth bullet, I believe, is a red-nose, it's a fire—"
- JE:** Okay.
- SS:** ...going out through there. You can tell where it hits.
- JE:** So you finished your training and where did they send you?
- SS:** From there they sent us to South Carolina, and put us with a crew: pilot, navigator, and another gunner. But only one gunner could fly at a time. I'd take time out with the other gunner. They had the range out there and the pilot got to where he knew the range so they didn't train much of a navigator. They didn't need him, he's just up there being subjected to a lot of stuff that didn't need to be. You know, they do go down, even in training.
- JE:** Yep.
- SS:** The pilot was bombing and we were shooting and this is all at the same time.
- JE:** He was bombing and you were shooting? The plane obviously carried bombs.
- SS:** Yeah, this plane, we trained in the plane we used overseas. The same type plane.
- JE:** What plane was that?
- SS:** An A-26.
- JE:** Do you remember how many bombs that plane could carry?
- SS:** It carried four five-hundred pounders.
- JE:** So while the pilot was dropping bombs—
- SS:** I was shooting.
- JE:** You were shooting.

SS: Yeah.

JE: And you were firing at other planes?

SS: Yeah.

JE: So you were finally the gunner of the plane, and where was that?

SS: After we finished there in South Carolina, finished our training there, then we sat around and waited another two or three months to get overseas. They had to have all these people in the pipeline, so we went in the pipeline. And when they got need for us, why they put us on a plane and shipped us overseas.

I'll never forget that, I was just a young kid, but I signed for an airplane up in Maine someplace. Somebody had to sign for that airplane we were going to fly over, and I had to sign for it. I said, "I don't know about that bookkeeping."

JE: You had to sign that you took possession of the plane, is that it?

SS: Well, yeah, somebody had to have their name on it out.

JE: Yeah.

Chapter: 05 - 3:40

Coin Flip

John Erling: So they shipped you overseas. Where was that?

Shawnee Stewart: We stayed in Maine there several days. Then we flew over to Newfoundland.

JE: Newfoundland?

SS: Newfoundland, yeah.

JE: Yeah.

SS: We stopped off there and my other gunner, we had to flip to see which guy was going to fly with the pilot that we trained with. He lost and I got to choose, so I said, "I'll just go with our pilot and you can go with whoever they assign."

And he did. But that was bad for him. They went down between Newfoundland and the Isle of Man off the English coast. The weather got bad, I guess, so there was number one gone out of our crew.

JE: There, by a flip of a coin, your life was saved—

SS: Right.

JE: ...at that point.

SS: Right.

JE: Did you hear about that plane going down very long after they took off?

SS: Well, we didn't hear about it until we got to the Isle of Man. They didn't show up. They were supposed to show up at the Isle of Man. We showed up and waited on them a while, but finally, they confirmed that he wasn't going to make it.

JE: Did that sink into your mind then?

SS: Things got pretty serious, that's pretty serious.

JE: Yeah.

SS: That will wake you up. I not only had lost my crew member, but the first guy I'd lost out of my crew. That's a wakeup call.

JE: And you hadn't even started yet.

SS: Hadn't even started, that's right.

The Isle of Man, after we got there they had a place for us, I forget what field it was.

JE: Where was the Isle of Man?

SS: Well, it's off the coast of England, up on the northwest. They had a lot of storms up there.

On that same trip, we had to get down, I suspect, twenty feet off the water. Some of the waves were almost higher than our airplane.

JE: Why were you that low?

SS: The storm—it was raining and windy and somehow they couldn't get out of that hole.

JE: So you were flying as low—

SS: As low as they could get. Yeah.

JE: ...to the water as you could to get underneath the clouds.

SS: I was saved some of the problems, I guess, because I was riding behind the pilot back there in, you might say, the bomb bay. And I couldn't see out. And I had to get up and go to a window to look out. I saw what was out there, I didn't choose to look at that all afternoon.

JE: And you stayed in that position flying above the water?

SS: Yeah, I don't know how long we stayed in that position, but it wasn't a comfortable position.

JE: What were you thinking?

SS: Well, just, another incident. You satisfy all this stuff, or at least I had to, before you get on the plane. You reconcile yourself to whatever is going to happen, and you know something's going to happen. So you have to dismiss all of that from your mind. You can't do your job if you're worried about that, if you're worried about getting killed. You can't do that. So I had to make up my mind and reconcile that situation before I went out and got into where I couldn't handle it.

JE: Yep.

SS: Because you might kill three or four.

JE: What happened as you were flying above the water?

SS: Well, I laid down and tried to relax. I'm not sure I did.

JE: How did that flight end?

SS: It ended all right for me and the pilot.

JE: Oh.

SS: We landed on the Isle of Man.

Chapter: 06 - 5:00

Wrong Turn

John Erling: Do you remember your first target and you shot that plane down?

Shawnee Stewart: I didn't shoot a plane down. That I know of.

JE: But you took fire yourself?

SS: Oh, well, yeah. That's what took the wing off our plane. Anti-aircraft, yeah.

JE: A wing was taken off your craft?

SS: Yeah.

JE: Was this after many weeks of flying?

SS: Well, it was my last flight.

JE: How many flights had you made?

SS: Twenty-eight and a half.

JE: The half is the one you're now going to talk about?

SS: That's what I said.

JE: You're flying along and your craft takes fire?

SS: Of course, you know, you're always cognizant of what's out there. And you run it through your mind, "What if this happens? Or that? Or the other?" And you kind of go through whatever you might need to do, want to do. So I had done all of those things and then it was a bad target. There was lots of flack.

And I'm going to say something here that I haven't said. I haven't told a soul. I'm not sure that I want to say it but it's true, I checked it out. Our flight leader turned left off the target. We had been briefed that "There's a gun over there, don't turn left, turn right." So he turned left, and pow! they got our plane. That's the only plane they got. He was a colonel.

JE: And he took the left turn?

SS: Right. The flight leader.

JE: He was the flight leader. Okay, he wasn't flying in your plane.

SS: No.

JE: He was in his own plane.

SS: Right.

JE: And he was leading—

SS: He was leading—

JE: ...many—

SS: ...about fifteen planes.

JE: And so when he took that left turn everybody followed him?

SS: Right. You follow.

JE: Your plane was hit.

SS: Not one plane was hit except ours.

JE: Do you hold some resentment toward him?

SS: Well, yes and no. I guess I can understand how a man could, could lose it, you know. Because it was bad.

JE: The flack that was coming out?

SS: The flack was bad; you couldn't hardly see. Somebody'd bound to get it, it just happened to be our plane.

JE: You think he froze? He became afraid and when they told him the right thing to do to avoid being shot at he could have turned right.

SS: Right, yeah, he knew.

JE: But you—

SS: They had told him where the gun was.

JE: Yeah, yeah. You never saw him again?

SS: No.

JE: Then you and your pilot were hit?

SS: Yeah.

JE: Tell us about that moment.

SS: That was, that was terrible, that was terrible. Ordinarily I would go out the bomb bay doors, but the right wing was hit and some of the motor, there was fire and smoke, and the wing's gone. And I was back here taking all the smoke and the fire. But I couldn't get the doors open to go out so I had to go out the top. And the plane was spinning.

JE: Spinning?

SS: Spinning. Yeah. And being a young man I managed to get out.

JE: The plane is spinning?

SS: Right.

JE: And you got out on top of the plane?

SS: Right.

JE: What is the pilot doing at that time?

SS: He told me, and this is after we got back together a couple of months later, he said that he was stunned by the shell. Well, I guess we both were, I don't know. But anyhow, I got out and went on out. I hit the tail, I don't know whether it was vertical or the horizontal stabilizer, across here.

JE: Across your chest.

SS: Yeah.

JE: Lower chest.

SS: Yeah. Got this arm and all this in through here.

JE: When you got out on the plane, on the top—

SS: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: You were blown back.

SS: Right.

JE: And the stabilizer of the plane caught you?

SS: It caught me, yeah.

JE: And if it hadn't caught you?

SS: I'd have been well on my way to safety. I would have just made a parachute jump.

JE: Okay, so you had a parachute on you.

SS: Oh yeah.

JE: And you were expecting to get up on top of the plane—

SS: Yeah.

JE: ...and to be able to jump off.

SS: Yeah.

JE: And parachute.

SS: Just tumble or whatever.

JE: Right. But it was the stabilizer that kept you from doing that.

SS: Either horizontal or vertical, I don't know.

JE: So as you got blown up against it what did it do to your arm then?

SS: Well, it shattered it, nine ribs, shoulder blade, lung, and then when I hit the ground I broke my leg and this ankle. I think really I broke it going down through a tree. And then I had some flack up in here, but that didn't bother me, the flack didn't bother me.

JE: You took flack in your leg?

SS: Yeah.

JE: So as you're coming down you're taking flack.

SS: No I took it, I think, on the hit.

JE: Okay.

SS: The plane hit.

JE: All right.

SS: I would say so.

JE: But even so, you were not feeling the pain of it?

SS: No.

JE: You didn't even know that—

SS: You don't feel any pain.

JE: ...at that point.

Chapter: 07 - 5:50

Emergency Landing

John Erling: Your parachute, did you have to pull with your other arm then?

Shawnee Stewart: Well, that's another story. I had a chest chute, and this is another one of those "I should have done it a different way," but it had two hooks. I had my pointers on but this thing just came in and hooked. So I couldn't watch through my periscope really good with my parachute up here in front of me. It got in the way. So I got to where I would unbuckle one side. That might have been good or bad, I don't know. I unbuckled it before we got hit. And then when I came out of the plane, well, I hit one of the stabilizers and it broke that parachute away from me and my harness and dangled out there—I was still hooked, but it dangled it out there twenty or thirty feet.

JE: And you were only tethered to it by a strap?

SS: Right.

JE: And it shouldn't have been flying ahead of you.

SS: Well, it should have been right there.

JE: Right up there. Over your chest.

SS: Not over this way and not over to the ground.

JE: Right. So you're looking at this parachute.

SS: Yeah, there it is out there. When I came to, that was my situation. I don't know how long I was out. But when I came to, that was my situation. I thought, "Well, I'd better get that thing back in here and open it up." It was twenty feet from me. So I tried this arm and it was broken, can't use it. Then I just grabbed the shroud lines so I could bring her in.

JE: You pulled the parachute back to you by your right arm.

SS: Right.

JE: Slowly pulling it back, something that should have been done with two hands but you did it with one. So you're pulling it back—

SS: It would have been a lot easier if I'd have had two hands.

JE: Yes, it would have been.

SS: I'd have done this.

JE: Right. So you pulled the parachute back, which had not opened yet.

SS: No.

JE: And you pull it back. This is all with one hand?

SS: I held it in between my legs.

JE: Held the parachute between your legs.

SS: Yeah and I pulled the rip cord.

JE: Pulled the rip cord. Then what happened?

SS: Well, it blossomed out and I was, "Thank you, Lord."

JE: Wow. Now you've left this plane and you're in the air with your parachute.

SS: Right.

JE: Is it attached to you well enough so you didn't have to worry about it?

SS: Yeah.

JE: So then what happens?

SS: Well, I go to the ground.

JE: Were you in the air very long?

SS: Not very long. I just went down into this forest and I went down through a tree. That creates problems too.

JE: You believe you broke your leg then when you came down?

SS: I think so. I can't be sure of that.

JE: Did you land in the tree?

SS: No, I went on to the ground.

JE: Tell us where this is, that you were landed.

SS: At Jervadine, [time 2:40] near the Rhine River.

JE: You land on the ground.

SS: Yeah, I land on the ground. And with my head right up against a tree. And the next thing I knew, I heard a little rustling sound and I kinda opened my eyes and looked around.

Couldn't move much. There were about three or four pistols aimed at my head. They were reaching around the tree at me.

JE: Members of the German army—

SS: Yeah.

JE: ...pointing pistols at you.

SS: Yeah.

JE: Then what happens?

SS: Well, they finally decided I was harmless. But I did have my gun on—they took that. And, um, they were, I would say, more than hospitable. That's saying a whole lot, they never did mistreat me. Never did.

JE: You had the injury to your left arm and your ribs and all, did they know that? You couldn't communicate with them.

SS: I couldn't communicate with them, no. They could tell that I was just limp.

JE: So they knew you were hurt and needed attention. So did they put you on a gurney?

SS: These were soldiers. They sent the medics out there in a little truck. An old boy loaded me up, took me back out to the barnyard not too far up there, took me out there in the middle of the barnyard. At that point in time, the war was winding down and they were running scared, they were running scared.

As a matter of fact, there were stories in the papers. The stories were that the farmers were finding these airmen on the ground and they weren't very kind to them. So we had to worry about that, I did. But there were some women and a bunch of kids standing around the edge out there and they were looking to see what's going on. And I saw these people come through with their pitchforks. I thought, "Well, I guess this is another incident." But they didn't stop, they just walked right on by.

JE: So at that time, were the German soldiers still with you?

SS: No, he left. I was out there by myself.

JE: In this farm yard.

SS: In this barnyard.

JE: When he walks by you, you think, "Wow, I escaped another one"?

SS: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Now what?

SS: Finally, the military came by and one of them interviewed me. He could speak English. And, of course, I didn't know enough to tell him anything. He tried to have me say things but I couldn't do that.

JE: Did he want you to say certain things?

SS: Well, he was wanting me to say how many planes and where we were based. That type stuff. I just said, "I don't know."

JE: And he—

SS: He accepted that.

JE: ...he accepted that, right.

SS: Yeah. Like I said now, the war was just about over.

JE: In 19—?

SS: Forty-five.

JE: Forty-five.

SS: I got shot down on April 16.

JE: Of 1945.

SS: They took me to a hospital and I stayed there nine days, as a prisoner. They took care of me.

JE: The pain hadn't set in during all this time?

SS: Uh-uh (negative), no.

JE: You're on the ground and then they took you to the hospital and the pain still hadn't set in?

SS: Right. And a good thing because they didn't have any medicine. They told that.

Chapter: 08 - 2:30**Hospital**

John Erling: Once you get to the hospital—

Shawnee Stewart: They set up my arm, no medicine. They wrapped me up here, ribs, then they wrapped up my foot.

JE: And was no morphine or anything that they gave you?

SS: No, uh-uh (negative). But didn't seem to bother me. They were all young doctors. They said, "Now this may hurt a little."

I said, "Well, just do a good job." And they did a good job.

JE: During some of that nine days in the hospital you were in pain?

SS: Yeah.

JE: Were there many other prisoners?

SS: There were about twelve more prisoners. One other guy had a leg shot off and they put he and I over here. They had to change his bandages. I didn't have any bandages, I wasn't broken.

JE: Your skin wasn't broken.

SS: But they had to change him. The poor rascal, he was in pretty bad shape and he was kinda miserable. I mean, he'd want to hold my hand every time they dressed his leg. And he had a pretty good grip.

JE: Terrible pain and no medication at all.

SS: No medication.

JE: Wow. Were there others in that hospital area that had surgery? I was wondering without any medication they might amputate legs or anything like that.

SS: I don't believe they would.

JE: Yeah.

SS: Now, they were dying right and left though, back over in the German ward. The first night, they put a drunken Russian, I think, with me, guarding me.

JE: To guard you?

SS: Yeah, yeah he stayed in the room with me.

JE: As if you were going to run anywhere.

SS: He was drinking pretty heavy, tried to give me a drink. And I said, "Well, I'm in too bad of shape to take a drink."

JE: Although you might have thought the drink might have helped medicate you and deaden the pain.

SS: Well, he might have been drinking gasoline. He was dirty, filthy, you know. But he had the gun and he's guarding me.

Then the next night, they brought me into another building and I guess these people, who were on their way out, one of them died right beside me there that night. An old boy hollering for his mother. You talk about sad bunch.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

SS: All sorts of things happened.

JE: Yeah.

SS: And you hear a boy, oh, hollering on down the way. I guess they didn't have medicine for their own people either.

JE: Yeah.

SS: We didn't mean for them to have, did we? Huh?

Chapter: 09 - 4:12

Released to Americans

Shawnee Stewart: This one old boy, American, he could talk German. And as I keep saying, they knew the war was over. So he talked them into stopping the war and take me and this guy here with his leg off back across the line so we could get some treatment. So we did, they did. And we were exchanged on a nice day, the 24th.

John Erling: You say across the line. They would have taken you to where?

SS: Well, they got in touch with the Americans, so they took us down and put us in a little truck and here we went. We got down there to a certain place, stopped, everything got quiet. And they said, "All right, let's go."

So the Germans and Americans took us across that no-man's land. We crossed that but there wasn't a shot fired. They had the white flags.

We rode along there a little while and stopped the cars, the ambulances, jerked the doors open, and there were the Americans.

JE: A wonderful sight for you.

SS: Hmm (thoughtful sound), God.

JE: Yeah.

SS: Yeah.

JE: The emotions are still there.

SS: Deep, deep.

JE: Yeah. Sixty years later you still feel it.

SS: Yeah.

JE: And so the American doctors then were able to tend to you.

SS: I thought I could get through it without crying.

JE: No. You know, it's real, and the fact that you're sharing this, everybody needs to know the impact of what happens in war.

SS: Yeah.

JE: So they opened the door and there were the Americans and it was obviously a wonderful, jubilant feeling. That they were there to save you.

SS: Yeah.

JE: And not only to fix your arm and your ribs, but you had been a prisoner of war.

SS: Oh yeah.

JE: And so now you're being released. So you had several things going here for you.

SS: Yeah.

JE: They were going to tend to you bodily and you were no longer a captive.

SS: That's right. It's a different feeling.

JE: All those feelings are still there and you can feel how jubilant you felt all these years later.

SS: Yeah, all these years later.

JE: So then you went into an American hospital?

SS: Yeah. They send you through a series of hospitals. It takes longer for them to identify you, they don't want to get the wrong person.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

SS: Seems like they spent too much time on that, but they got me all the way back, back over to Edinburgh, Scotland.

JE: They must have been giving you some pain medication here.

SS: Oh, well, after I got to the Americans, yeah.

JE: Yeah, right, right.

SS: Oh yeah.

JE: As soon as they could.

SS: Oh yeah, I got some deep hurting later on.

JE: Yeah.

SS: Deep hurts, ribs, you know.

JE: Yeah.

SS: Well, that's the most miserable thing you ever had—

JE: And you coughed—

SS: ...a broken rib.

JE: If you just coughed a little bit it hurt.

SS: Oh, gosh, yeah.

JE: So then they get you back to Edinburgh, Scotland. And there you remained in the hospital for?

SS: Oh, I stayed there three, four weeks. Till I could travel. And then they put me on a plane and sent me back. They brought me back here to the States, Fort Dix, New Jersey, I believe. They had me patched up pretty good. I could go in a wheelchair by then. They would take soldiers places, you know, if you wanted to go.

I remember, they took me down to one place there, it's a famous nightclub. I was getting along pretty good, then they shipped me down to Okmulgee down here. That's a pretty big hospital, military.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

SS: I stayed there a while, then they shipped me down to Texas, and started cutting on me again. They got down here on this foot, all down through here to here.

JE: Because that was all damaged from landing?

SS: Yeah.

JE: So you had surgery on the left foot.

SS: Yeah. And they just let the ribs grow back, let this arm grow back. It dangled around for about a year and a half. I thought I was going to lose it.

JE: You had no control?

SS: No.

JE: Didn't have any muscle power?

SS: No.

JE: In it at all.

Chapter: 10 - 3:15

Missing in Action

John Erling: Before we move on to hearing about the possibility of amputating Shawnee's arm, we want to share a document that came to light after this recording was made. And now that you've heard Shawnee tell us about his plane losing its wing as it was being fired upon, and Shawnee struggled to use his parachute as the plane was going down, I want you to know that there were other pilots watching Shawnee's plane take the direct hit. And they did not see a parachute open.

So the father of Shawnee, David Steward, received a Missing in Action letter from the army, which reads as follows. And I remind you that Shawnee went by his first name, Milton, in the military. The letter is dated 21 April, 1945, comes from Headquarters, 409th Bombardment Group.

Dear Mr. David Steward:

It is with a sincere regret that I pass on to you the fact that your son, Staff Sergeant Milton S. Steward, has been reported Missing in Action. Milton and his pilot, John F. Bell Jr., took off on April 16, 1945, for Zerbst, Germany, just sixty-five miles southwest of Berlin. The target was a well-fortified strong point and the flack was very heavy.

Milton's plane received a direct hit, which blew off the wing. As the plane fell, no parachutes were seen to open and the plane was observed to have hit the ground and exploded. They were just seconds away from the target when the plane was hit.

Milton was getting to be an old-timer in our group and was well-liked by all the officers and enlisted men who knew him. His squadron commander, Major Joseph J. May, said if he could pick his combat gunners he would want them all to be just like Milton Steward. He was a good gunner with any pilot and liked to fly.

John Bell Jr. was one of the best formation flyers in our group and they were on Bell's twenty-eighth combat mission.

Your son was always a willing worker and liked to work and help out as an Operations Clerk. He often talked of his family and of his future plans and going back to college. Milton was a clean-cut, well-disciplined soldier, a good organizer, and took a very active part in squadron athletics and functions. He's been a great asset to our country and in bringing about the peace we all desire.

May I add my hopes to yours in this much dreaded and anxious time of writing. Please feel free to write for any additional information you may desire.

Most sincerely,

Thomas R. Ford, Colonel Air Corps Commandant

It's hard to imagine the feelings that went through Shawnee's father's mind and in those coming days, because more than likely they thought they had lost their son. But we can only imagine the joy that David Steward felt when he received news that his son, Milton Shawnee Steward, was alive.

We wanted to share that document with you. And now we continue with Shawnee's story as he talks about his experience at an amputation hospital.

Chapter: 11 - 2:50**Amputation Hospital**

John Erling: And you thought you might to either lose it or live that way for—

Shawnee Stewart: Well, they shipped me down to a hospital down there. It was an amputation hospital. I didn't really know where I was going. We got down there and I could see where I was.

So the day came around they wanted to talk with me. They told me, "Well, you know, it may not grow, you may not make it."

JE: The arm may not make it.

SS: Yeah. I said, "Well, I'm just going to hold off a while. I don't want to lose that arm, that's a good arm."

JE: If you'd have said yes then they would have amputated it?

SS: They would, oh, they would have had that thing off of there. Because it was a year, but it never would turn blue or anything. They had all sorts of things, they were going to stretch it out there and then if I could stretch the fingers out. I was taking water therapy and every kind of therapy I could think of, or they could think of.

Finally, one day, I got a little feeling.

JE: All of a sudden?

SS: Some ?? [time :56] right here.

JE: A little tingling?

SS: A little tingling, yeah.

JE: That had to be another special moment for you.

SS: Well, that was another special moment, right. I've been unlucky but I've been lucky too.

JE: So the tingling comes back in your hand. And then you say, "Well, maybe this whole arm will come back again."

SS: Yeah. Don't give up, don't give up.

JE: You wonder if other soldiers were asked if they should amputate their arms and legs and they made hasty decisions.

SS: I'm afraid some might have, yeah.

JE: Some of them were in such pain too that they couldn't help—

SS: Yeah.

JE: ...thinking that this is going to get better.

SS: And they were working under conditions there that they didn't have enough space. They didn't have enough doctors. I'm sure they put some things off that they shouldn't have.

JE: Back to your arm, would you say that the arm came back fully for you? Was it a year or two later?

SS: Yeah. Well, fully, as stout as it would ever get.

JE: What condition is that arm in today?

SS: I think it's in good condition. We all have different definitions, you know.

JE: Are you saying it was fully restored?

SS: Not fully restored but I haven't lost it.

JE: Yeah.

SS: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: So they had surgery on your leg. How long were you in the hospital then before they finally released you?

SS: Oh, a year and a half.

JE: The whole ordeal from on that plane and parachuting off that plane, is it two years?

SS: At least.

JE: At least two years.

SS: Yeah.

JE: Maybe two and a half.

SS: Yeah.

JE: Of healing?

SS: It's still with me. The remnants of that incident.

JE: Yeah.

SS: And I call that an incident.

JE: You were healing two and a half years later.

SS: I don't know, maybe I still am. The VA says so.

JE: That you're still healing?

SS: Yeah.

Chapter: 12 - 2:25

Just a Little Reminder

John Erling: Were you separated from the military then?

Shawnee Stewart: Yeah. I was in the military five years. I got a dose of it.

JE: Coming out of the hospital after surgery of your leg and recuperating, then it was time to get out. They let you go then, didn't they?

SS: Yeah.

JE: Where did you leave the military? What base?

SS: I was in Florida. It was a release place; I forget what they call those. They take care of you there when they're letting you out.

JE: Do you today have arthritis because of it in your arm and you can feel the rain and the barometric pressure?

SS: Oooh, yeah. I do this, and oh, yeah.

JE: You're twisting your hands right now.

SS: Yeah.

JE: And you can feel it in your wrists.

SS: Yeah. That's just a little reminder.

JE: Then by that time you're in your early twenties.

SS: Yeah.

JE: What happens to Shawnee then?

SS: Well, he can't work. He can't do anything. He doesn't have any trades, doesn't have any money. But the GI Bill, he has that. And I used it four years.

JE: You went to school where?

SS: OU.

JE: You'd started out at Northeastern.

SS: Yeah.

JE: How much time did you have at Northeastern?

SS: Oh, about two years.

JE: And then you went to Oklahoma University.

SS: Yeah.

JE: What degree did you earn there?

SS: Well, I had a degree in sociology. Majored, I guess, both in economics and sociology.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative). So now we must be talking about 1947, 8, 9, in there somewhere.

SS: Yeah. Yeah.

JE: So you graduated with your degrees, and then?

SS: Let's see, I went to work with the City of Tulsa.

JE: What was your job?

SS: Down in the City Planning Department. Now this is an old country boy studying city planning, regional planning. I liked it, I liked regional planning more than I liked city planning.

JE: But the City of Tulsa had already been planned, so?

SS: So we just expanded on them.

JE: Right.

SS: But then I got off into Transportation Planning.

JE: How long did you work for the City of Tulsa?

SS: A couple three years, but I didn't get right off into transportation from Tulsa. I went from Tulsa to Springfield, Missouri. There to Kansas City. These were metro areas. Then I came

to the state of Oklahoma Highway Department and did transportation planning for them. I stayed there about twelve years.

JE: What year did you get married?

SS: Forty-eight, I believe.

JE: Shortly after you got out of the air force.

SS: Not too long, that's right.

JE: Right.

SS: Not too long.

Chapter: 13 - 3:15

Politics

John Erling: So there you're raising a family. Then what happens?

Shawnee Stewart: Well, I got into politics a little bit. I was going to school at the University of Oklahoma and I thought Sequoyah County needed a new representative.

JE: Sequoyah County needed a new state representative.

SS: Yeah.

JE: Then what did you do about that?

SS: Well, I just went down and filed and won.

JE: Even before you got out of OU?

SS: Right.

JE: You were twenty-five years old?

SS: Twenty-six or seven.

JE: You were in OU but you just didn't feel Sequoyah County was being represented right.

SS: I was a little bit facetious there when I made that statement, actually.

JE: Well, then, how was it you ran for office?

SS: Politics runs in my family a little bit.

JE: How's that?

SS: Well, we have interests in public affairs, what's going on. And we try and act as a good citizen really when we see something might need tweaking. For example, my brother ran for sheriff.

JE: In what county?

SS: Sequoyah County. And he won. His name is Earl. So he fools around and he's elected mayor down there at Sallisaw, three or four times. That was before I got into it.

When I got back I found that I had a little interest in politics. So I just ran for state legislature.

JE: And you won your first time up?

SS: Right. I won two terms but I didn't like it too much.

JE: Because?

SS: Well, it takes too much time. I had things to do.

JE: Well, you were a student, for one.

SS: Well, student for one, and then I was going to be out in a job working. And that takes time.

JE: Yeah.

SS: And then I had a family, raising a family, that takes time. So I just dropped politics.

JE: You would have served in the state legislature; do you remember the years?

SS: Oh, about '50 to '54.

JE: You ever wish you had gone back into politics again?

SS: I got back in it not too long ago. Got into this Indian stuff.

JE: With the Indian stuff?

SS: They didn't have a good chief, I didn't think.

JE: Which tribe are you talking about?

SS: Cherokee. Election was coming up and so I just went down and volunteered my services.

JE: And you were supporting who for election?

SS: Chad Smith.

JE: Chad Smith.

SS: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And you worked his campaign?

SS: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Chad Smith was successful and he ran for reelection and will run again as we sit here in 2009.

SS: Yeah. It seems like he's done a pretty good job, best I could find out.

JE: You got into the campaign because you are Cherokee.

SS: Yeah. Right. And some things needed fixing.

JE: You're eighty-eight now, you were in your seventies when you decided, as a Cherokee, to jump in and support this young man named Chad Corntassle Smith.

SS: Yeah, I think I made a good choice.

JE: So that's got to make you feel good because you jumped on the bandwagon of a young man that had not run for office before, I believe.

SS: Right. Right.

JE: Well, you're to be admired.

SS: Well, different people have different definitions of that.

JE: Yeah, but you served our country, you served our state, and you served your tribe. Service to three areas. And that's much, much more than many, many people can ever say.

SS: Well, I guess it is, yeah. I hadn't thought of it that way.

Chapter: 14 - 2:15**Listen to the Elderly**

John Erling: There will be young people who listen to our conversation today. Advice for students who will be listening to this, what would you say to them?

Shawnee Stewart: Well, I think there's something to be said for older people having an opportunity to say what they want to say. Because most of them, you know, they've got something to say. They might not latch onto the idea of saying it until they get to the right opportunity, and then it'll just come out. And I think when they hear some of the older people that they've heard about or know about, I think that will help them get a better insight. It's not all bad, you have to give it a chance.

I have a brother that's ninety-two.

JE: Is that Earl?

SS: Yeah, he's had a chance to see a little more than I have. I notice that difference when I talk with him. Four years, he knows things that I don't know. He was a school teacher. He's had an opportunity to talk to a lot of people and, like the rest of us, you just have so much education. That's all you can have. Some people can get smarter and smarter, but not very many.

We're all still measuring Obama and Bill Clinton, George Bush. We'll do that for a while and then we'll finally come to some conclusions. They might be good or bad, I don't know. We all remember Franklin D. Roosevelt and what visions he had. And they said he was the greatest, he brought us out of the Depression. What was his famous saying? The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.

I don't like the word "fear." I don't like that word. It doesn't tell me anything. I guess we all have them though, but I don't think it describes me or you or the next man. When he lays down at night and goes to sleep he thinks about what they might be.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

SS: But I don't know if this will hold us together or not. It seems like it ought to be a better word.

JE: Well, I thank you. Preserving freedom for our country, that's what you were doing long miles from this land and the pain and suffering you went through, as others like you. We need to hear those stories.

SS: You're doing a good thing. I think your project will be very helpful to younger people.

JE: Yeah.

SS: Some older ones can listen too.

JE: Right. Thank you so much.

SS: Thank you.

Chapter: 15 - 0:33**Conclusion**

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