



Steve Poulos

United States Army

Sergeant

European Theater

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Interviewer:
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THIS INTERVIEW IS NOT EDITED FOR CONTENT, LANGUAGE OR HISTORICAL ACCURACY

Geoff: Can you spell your last name?

Steve: P-O-U-L-O-S.

Geoff: Where were you born?

Steve: I was born in Salt Lake City Utah in 1925.

Geoff: What was your dad's name?

Steve: John S. Poulos.

Geoff: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

Steve: I have three sisters and three brothers.

Geoff: And you grew up in Salt Lake City?

Steve: I came down from Logan to Salt Lake and grew up in Salt Lake.

Geoff: Tell us when you joined the army.

Steve: I didn't join the army I was drafted in June of 1943 after high school. I was 18 years old.

Geoff: Where were you sent?

Steve: I was sent to Texas. For camp drill and training at Camp Wallace Texas.

Geoff: Were you expecting to be drafted?

Steve: Yeah, right out of high school.

Geoff: So you went to Texas, tell us about some of your training.

Steve: That's where I went for six months. I trained down there with some heavy, heavy soldiers and I learned how to take care of myself in combat, if I ever got into combat.

Geoff: What were you trained as?

Steve: I was trained as a foot soldier and then I went into heavy equipment as a machine gunner. I didn't want it but I got it. I knew they'd pick me first if you had a machine gun.

Geoff: So you didn't want to be a machine gunner?

Steve: No.

Geoff: So were you the guy that carried the tripod or what did you carry?

Steve: I carried the tripod all the time until it went under water going into the Normandy beachhead at Omaha Beach.

Geoff: How many people were in a machine gun squad?

Steve: Five.

Geoff: And what did they do?

Steve: Carried my ammunition.

Geoff: And the gun?

Steve: I carried a machine gun and the other guy carried a tripod.

Geoff: And another guy carried ammo?

Steve: Yes. The ammo was carried on the field with me. The others got me ready to fire.

Geoff: Tell us about how you got over to England.

Steve: I was in England in 1943 and trained there for one year. In Coventry and Wales England.

Geoff: How did you get to England?

Steve: I went from New York on a big ship to Scotland and then from Scotland to Wales England and from Wales England to Coventry England.

Geoff: What was the trip like when you went over?

Steve: I was sick for twelve days on the boat – seasick. Going over.

Geoff: Was there a storm?

Steve: I don't know what happened but it was awful. I just couldn't take it. I would just sit there and weather it out.

Geoff: When you got to Coventry were you assigned to a unit?

Steve: Yes, I was a replacement. I would either go 2nd or 29th Division in case there was nobody left they would put us in there.

Geoff: When did you know you were going to be in the D-Day Invasion?

Steve: On the D-Day Invasion, this is interesting, they got us on the boat the day before because Eisenhower tried to stop the invasion for weather. We had problems with the weather report so you try to stop it and so he says, “well, it’s this or that”. We go June sixth.

Geoff: So did you know you were going to go in the invasion?

Steve: I didn’t know I was going to go to France. We all didn’t know where we were going. They had us...we didn’t know where we were going until we got on the boat that morning and got on the cargo ship and they handed us some French money and I thought “oh no, here we go. It looks like we’re going to France. We’ve got French money”. And of course I said that’s suicide.

Geoff: This unit you were assigned to, did you know anybody in it?

Steve: No one. Just one man from Salt Lake, his name was Glen Standing and Don McGee and that’s about it.

Geoff: And how did you feel not knowing anybody?

Steve: I said, “Well, go or go”. I had to do it or else bow out.

Geoff: Were they friendly to you in the unit?

Steve: We didn’t have time to talk; everybody was in a bad mood. We were all thinking about dying and we had to protect ourselves from dying.

Geoff: Tell us about the morning of June 6th. You’ve been on the ship for a couple of days.

Steve: We went out a ways in the English Channel and we were trying to get the okay from General Eisenhower wanting to go in. After two days the word came over the mic and said, “We

are leaving tonight. At five o'clock in the morning we're leaving from England for the invasion of France". And we were all thinking "this guy is out of his mind, he couldn't do this to us" and he did. We got on the cargo ship, went down the ropes, we had ropes. We had to go down the ropes to get onto the Higgins boats. We were on the Higgins', they were made in New Orleans you know and these were boats that took you in on D-Day onto shore.

Geoff: These were the landing craft?

Steve: Yeah.

Geoff: Had you been briefed at what you were going to do?

Steve: No. We were just doing what they say.

Geoff: You had been on ship for a couple of days, were you sick again?

Steve: I finally got to my senses because I knew the ship was going to stop pretty quick and when the ship stopped and we went and got things organized then we went down the ramp onto the Higgins boats which were made in New Orleans.

Geoff: So it was stormy that day?

Steve: Bad. It was real stormy, we thought they were gonna...but very slightly and we didn't know...starboard was 25 feet high going in. After going in the guy that took us in with the Higgins boat said "I'm afraid to take you guys in too much onto the shore. I think there's mines out there. If we hit a mine we all go up. So here's what I'm gonna do – I'm gonna drop the gate" – clear out here in the water. Way out!

Geoff: How far out?

Steve: 200 yards.

Geoff: Could you see what was happening at the beach?

Steve: Yeah and we saw guys going in and dropping. Going in – drop, going in – drop. No protection nowhere. Going in – drop. When I say drop they die. So he said “we all are going to jump out and swim for our lives”. We had 150 pound bags on us and the weight was really heavy so I go in, I have my machine gun on my shoulder on my side and I said “who needs that, I’ve got to save my life”. So I let it go in the water then I saw a bayonet on me. I was going down, down, down, down, down and wasn’t coming up and I thought “this has got to stop” so I took the bayonet and cut everything off. Even my shoes and shoelaces. Thanks to my training in Salt Lake at the Deseret Gymnasium where I trained – that’s where I trained.

Geoff: You trained in lifesaving?

Steve: Yeah, before I went in. So I cut myself loose of all the heavy equipment and I finally got on top. Wow! That was a good one! I got on top and I started swimming to the beach with nothing. No weapons at all. So I got on the beach and I didn’t know what to do, I had to do something to protect myself so I jumped onto an American Soldier which I believe was dead and took his rifle and part of his clothes because I didn’t have too many, they were in the water. So I got equipped on the beach and they were hammering on us! On the cliffs, boom, right down there. Everybody was going down and they told us “you’ve got no time to save anybody. If somebody gets hurt keep going. Don’t stop because they’ll get you too”. I felt really bad you know if you see somebody that needs some help. So I took their advice and I went and went and went and went and went. I got control of myself. There was a big cow out there and I said this is good thick protection for me. He was dead. I said “oh goody, goody. I’ll be safe now”. They kept hammering that cow until they stopped hammering. After they quit hammering here comes the parachuters and gave us new equipment on the beach, maybe five miles in. “Goody, goody, good! We’ve finally got some weapons”.

Geoff: So when you hit the beach all you had on was shorts?

Steve: I had shorts and stockings and my shirt. I had a shirt on with a bible in the shirt and my cross, which I'm wearing now.

Geoff: So you took the clothes off a dead man?

Steve: I took what I could take off of him and went inside shooting.

Geoff: Did you take his boots?

Steve: Yeah, I took everything. I left him on the beach naked just about. I didn't know when I was going to get clothes and it was cold cold water. Real cold water!

Geoff: So you're on the beach, how long were you actually in the sand on the beach?

Steve: I was in the sand for one day. Until they got control of tanks coming in and gave us some room to breath in.

Geoff: So you were on that beach for a full day?

Steve: Seven hours, eight hours, yes.

Geoff: Taking fire the whole time?

Steve: Fire from the cliffs.

Geoff: How did you finally get off the sand?

Steve: I got off the sand by crawling real small and real easy. I would run sometimes but I was afraid to run because somebody might get me so I actually crawled until I got onto a hedgerow which was very very small. And I sat there for three or four hours and they kept telling me "we need you now". How can you fight something with an M1? You need more than that where I

was especially where they were – the Germans. They had full control on the beach. They had five beaches – Omaha, Juno, Utah, Sherwood and others.

Geoff: So when you came in to Omaha beach describe what was going on, the fire, the cannon and the machine guns.

Steve: There were 5,000 airplanes, American airplanes in the air hammering the beach. Some got us, some got the Germans. They didn't hit their targets too well like they said. But now things are coming out that we got fired on with our own units and we had 5,000 ships out there as far as you could see, you could see them. Wow, that was it, that was a big one! And there were balloons in the air. The balloons in the air were there for a reason. That means the German's airplanes could not strafe or come in, if they did they'd hit the wires. They would hit the wire. [Barrage balloons]

Geoff: Tell us about the noise on Omaha beach.

Steve: The noise was so far out and you come in and hear what was going on, you weren't taking any orders from nobody. We had to pray - my ear. Monkey see monkey do.

Geoff: So did you find some other guys in your unit?

Steve: Yes, we found guys in our unit and we joined up and got acquainted as good as we could. We were all upset. We didn't know what was going on or how long we were going to be there. Only God knew how long we'd be there and we got acquainted and we got new clothes and new weapons. But it was a tragic, bad deal. We all almost got drowned.

Geoff: The evening of D-Day when it got dark, how did you sleep?

Steve: Behind animals, dead animals. We didn't sleep too well. You had to keep one eye opened and one ear opened and we didn't sleep.

Geoff: Was there a lot of artillery?

Steve: Oh yeah. A lot of artillery in the afternoon because they found out where we were – the Germans. They knew where we were so they hit that so heavy and got us all again.

Geoff: So you got into the hedgerows?

Steve: So then we got into the hedgerows after two days and that was a catastrophe. We got in the hedgerows and that's where they all were but you couldn't see them. The Germans, they were in the trees they were all over but you couldn't see them. So what we had to do was fire, fire, fire and kill what we could kill. It was a terrible night, a terrible evening and that night the airplanes came over and helped us out a little bit – American airplanes. They got the Germans behind the lines.

Geoff: Did they drop bombs?

Steve: Yeah. They dropped bombs, they dropped what they could. It looked like it shook the whole earth when they did that. I was frightened; all of us were. I said, "Well here we go again".

Geoff: So tell us about a hedgerow, what does it look like?

Steve: A hedgerow is something that's so thick that you can't see what's behind it and that's where they had advantage of us. It's tall grass about – I would say about four feet tall – the hedgerow and that was tough. You couldn't see them. So we kept on going and they told us one morning that for us it was going to be a big attack. We were going in and we were going to take Hill 192. Hill 192 is almost to St. Lô. We went and waited until that afternoon and they told us to dig in because they were coming over real heavy. So we dug in and they hit all night. We ran back.

Geoff: So they were bombarding you?

Steve: Yeah. We ran back to our lines and the big Generals said

“Hey, what are you guys doing back here?”

“They got us! They found us!”

“You go back there”

“But our weapons are in the foxholes”

“We’ll give you some more”

Geoff: So you got another machine gun?

Steve: Yeah. So I got the machine gun and started doing my thing and then we hit this small town and we got them pretty good and then we got into this small town called Saint Mary’s Trévières. It was all flat, F-L-A-T. And my sergeant said “Poulos, we have to search every house because you never know where they’re at”. We went to every town there was, every small town. We went to one little town, went down in a basement and there were five Germans and five ladies making love but their weapons were on the wall. My sergeant says, “move”! He wanted them all.

I said “you can’t do that, you’ll kill five people, they never had a weapon on them”

“Get out of my way – you take these women upstairs and outside and make sure they get clothes”.

Geoff: So you took five naked women outside?

Steve: Yeah. Five naked French girls. But they didn’t die, we saved them. Then we went into St. Lô and that was the biggest battle. A big battle!

Geoff: So tell us more about St. Lô.

Steve: St. Lô – guess who was there? General Patton. He came around but we never knew it and we were upside down and they said “this is it” and my golly sakes you wont believe this they

were there. General Patton was there with his tanks and saved us from dying! He turned around the corner and got them all.

Geoff: Could you see this going on where you were?

Steve: No, I didn't see too much going on but I heard. They got them all.

Geoff: Tell us about the day you got wounded.

Steve: The day I got wounded was behind a hedgerow. I didn't see this guy but he was in a tree and Sergeant Thomas says "I feel kinda spooky around here".

And I said, "Well just relax".

He said, "We're going to attack again".

So we all got up and started attacking, hit the hedgerow and I bounced right back. The sniper got me in the tree.

Geoff: Tell us about that and the cross.

Steve: The sniper got me and I bounced back and I never knew what hit me but electricity was going through my body at the time. I never knew how bad it was. So they set me on a stretcher and there were five Germans there on top of me with their guns. They didn't do a thing to me. I respect the Germans to this day. You take the Japanese, they'll hit you everywhere if they want but the Germans were good. They respected the cross.

Geoff: Tell us about the cross.

*** Tape Interrupt ***

Steve: So after I was hit they pulled me back to the beach which wasn't very far away, from St. Lô to the beach and I was in the operating room for two days. I still didn't know what hit me so one day the doctor came in and says "soldier you've been hit with five bullets that went right

through you". Two went through my stomach, two went through my shoulder, one went through my leg.

He said "I cannot save your right shoulder but we'll try and put a cast on it but I want you to know that you have a cross that we kept for you and it looks like it's been ricocheted".

I said "what do you mean ricocheted?"

"Well it looks like they tried to get you real good".

So to make the story short, the bullets that hit me right here (here's the markings) ricocheted and got me on the right shoulder and my arm today is paralyzed and I got a good pension from the government.

Geoff: So that cross saved you?

Steve: Yes sir. Instead of going through the jugular vein it bounced off and hit the right side and went in the bone. There's one in the bone still on the right shoulder.

Geoff: How long were you in the hospital?

Steve: In England I was in the hospital for six months.

Geoff: There was somebody you met in the hospital. Do you want to tell that story about that other Greek?

Steve: Yes. Before I say that, I was in the other hospital with all kinds of...a cast on and here comes the Colonel.

He says, "Soldier, you've done well. I'm giving you the Purple Heart and the Combat Badge, but I want you to know *you'll* be in combat soon".

When he said that to me I blew up.

I said "why in the hell aren't you up there?"

That was it. The next day they put me on a stretcher.

I said, "where am I going?"

"To a different hospital"

“Oh, okay good deal”.

So I go to this new hospital and I could see bars all over the place.

I say, “What kind of hospital is this? What is it?”

“Oh” he says, “this is where you guys are shell shocked”.

I say, “What does that mean?”

“A shell shock from the army, from battle. Shock brought on by battle”.

I said, “I’m not shocked”

“well we’ll find out tomorrow”.

The doctor comes in and I said, “What am I doing here?”

He said, “You’re here for observation”.

I said “listen, I got a cast on, I got bullets in me, what am I doing here?”

He said, “Did you tell our Colonel to go to hell?”

I says “yeah!” and I told him why.

While I was there for two weeks getting myself in gear we had examinations every morning.

The doctor would come in and check us all out.

“How do you feel Private Poulos?”

“Well I’m okay, I’m getting better”.

On the other end of the side of the bed was a little short guy and he made me laugh. His name was Tony.

He said, “I guess you know why you’re here”

“yeah, they tell me I’m dingy”

“well you’re not dingy but you are”.

And he made faces I’ll tell ya, I just...I couldn’t hold him back. So one day I go in the bathroom (this went on for a week) and I said, “Tony, I’m sorry to hear about your case”

“that’s okay, I’m going home”.

I said “what nationality are you?”

“I’m a Greek”

It seems like really he’s a Greek and I bounced back and gave him some feed back.

He said, “Are you a Greek? Talk to me”.

Now he says “I’m going back to America. I’m going back dingy, psycho”.

I said “Tony how will you do this? You act like you’re dead”

“I’m going home. My Dad died in New York and I was in Africa and they wouldn’t let me go home.”

I say “too bad.”

“I’m going home this way”.

I says “good luck”.

Geoff: So he’d been faking it?

Steve: I don’t know.

Geoff: So where did you go after you got out of that hospital?

Steve: After Birmingham General Hospital I went to a big hospital and they got orders from the Government “nobody goes in this hospital will come out and go back to combat, it’s over”. See they were training you after you got well and they put you on the firing line to see if you would flinch. Do you know what I mean by flinch?

Geoff: Tell me.

Steve: Flinch means you’re like this and you flinch you’re out but if you’re steady you’re in combat.

Geoff: So how did you do?

Steve: I didn’t go in there because mine was a different case.

Geoff: How did you get back to the US?

Steve: I got back to the US on a ship. On a hospital ship from England to New York and guess who I met? That guy, in New York walking in the same hospital as I was in.

Geoff: This is Tony?

Steve: Yeah Tony. I says “Tony you’re lucky”. So anyway I got there, I was there about two months then from there I went to Bushnell in Brigham City, the Indian School and I was there for six months.

Geoff: When you came to New York did you see the Statue of Liberty?

Steve: Yeah.

Geoff: Describe that.

Steve: I was walking at the time with my cast on, they were trying to keep the bones in place you know but I’ll guarantee you when I saw that I never thought I’d see that again – Never! And I saw that and all the guys that got killed I says, “Oh God I don’t believe it. They’re all over there dead and I’m here in a different world”.

Geoff: How did you feel when you saw the Statue of Liberty?

Steve: I went ape! Yeah, I went ape I was so excited that I went ape. I got excited.

Geoff: How did everybody else on the ship feel?

Steve: Most of the people on the ship were wounded. They were in bed. It was a hospital ship.

Geoff: So when did you first see some of your family again, you were at Bushnell. Tell us about that.

Steve: I was at Bushnell and after I got there I made a phone call.

I said, “Dad, ma I am here”

“What ward are you in?”

I said, "It's not a ward it's a jail"

"Well what are you doing in a jail?"

"Just get here".

They went up to Brigham City, went inside and there I was in a jail. They hadn't enough room for patients so they put me in the psycho ward until they got a room which was two days after.

Geoff: What happened when you saw your mom and dad?

Steve: It was just like a different world. I didn't believe it. Tears were coming out of your ears and eyes, just a sad day but a happy day. I was glad to be home and now it's up to the doctors.

Geoff: How much longer did you spend in the hospital?

Steve: I spent six months in Bushnell to try to get me well. I went through therapy; I went through all the motions. I went through everything until they got me going and then they said "you better go home, come back every week and get treatments on your shoulder".

Geoff: So looking back on World War II what can you tell people who weren't there? What can you tell them about it? What can you tell them that you think is important about what you did?

Steve: Well when there's a war going on you go. You don't turn back, you go. When they say, "go", go. Don't try to go to Canada. Don't sluff it, go. Be an American! What do you want your cake and eat it? Fight for America, it's your country.

Sally: Steve, how long does it take to go from England across the Channel to the beaches of Normandy?

Steve: From England in the English Channel I would say roughly about three or four hours.

Sally: What time did you arrive on the beach?

Steve: I arrived on the beach at 6:30 in the morning. I was the second wave going in. The first wave got wiped out.

Sally: What were your thoughts going across the channel and what were your conversations with your buddies knowing what you were heading for and wasn't your instinct to resist going forward if you're seeing that whole scene with the Higgins landing craft's front gate going down and seeing guys floating in the water – it just seems like a natural reaction to pull back.

Steve: Going in like that you don't save people or soldiers. You let them go and let them die until you get on land and get your feet going.

Geoff: When you swam ashore did you touch bottom?

Steve: No.

Geoff: Did you crawl ashore?

Steve: I was going down and I had to come up. I did all my performance in the water 100 feet deep.

Geoff: So when you finally swam ashore to strip and you touched the bottom, can you describe that?

Steve: I says "I don't believe this, I'm on land right now" and so I found this man and so I held onto him until I got what I wanted.

Geoff: How did you know where to go next after you got this stuff – rifles and boots and stuff?

Steve: I had to see where everybody was going – the other units. The 6th and 23rd Infantry division and different units and I had to find out where my unit was. I didn't care what unit I was in, I just wanted to go and do my thing. I didn't care about my unit, you know we had three

or four units in my division, I'm not going to worry how I'm going to find my regiment, I'm going into protect myself and do what I can.

Geoff: I'm trying to get an idea of when you finally were doing this it must have been...the rifle fire, the machine gun fire, the mortars must have been just intense, it must have been so confusing.

Steve: Oh, artillery was right to us hitting the dirt, bouncing off and lets put it this way, it was a miracle. It's a miracle that it bounced off and hit the ground and boom boom and boom boom. I always say that, it hit the ground and went their way and I survived.

Geoff: Is it hard for you to believe that you made it that day?

Steve: I just prayed to God and I just did my thing and I just told him what I wanted him to give me some help and he gave me the help and gave me everything I wanted. Without him I wouldn't be here today. That's how I believe. It was a miracle, then I got some calls back and they said that your friends got killed and that doesn't go over good at all. When they say somebody else got killed and you knew them, your whole life is turned around. You don't care, you just shoot, you go. You don't care. When somebody goes, especially your friends.

Geoff: Did you have a lot of friends in the unit that you had made?

Steve: Yes. I made quite a bit of friends because they depended on me with a machine gun. And I told them "I need help. I can't do this by myself"; I was a young kid – 19 years old.

Sally: Do you remember any conversations with your buddies you were having when you were in the English Channel going over?

Steve: I had some conversations but you know you get so shattered and so upset and so nervous that the only thought that runs through your mind is "*Am I going home?*"

When you're on the boat going over on those Higgins boats that's all you can talk about is "how do you feel sergeant?"

"Come on Greek, how do I feel? I'm not going home!"

I said, "Well I am. I'm going to try to get home".

Geoff: So one more thing about D-Day, what's the one thing you remember about D-Day over all the other impressions you have?

Steve: D-Day was, my impression was all those Higgins boats going in and how are we going back? The way it looked it was a suicide operation. We thought we were going to Russia or Italy but never France. But that day what got me was two American planes coming down and they got tangled up in their own wires that cut their wings off.

Geoff: Barrage Balloons?

Steve: Yeah. And what got me after awhile is that I had to go save myself.

Sally: Do you have children and grandchildren?

Steve: I have five children.

Sally: Have you talked to them about the war?

Steve: No I really haven't but a day will come when I'll talk to them a bit about what I did. They're all grown up so they can take it.

Geoff: Thank you Steve I think you really told us quite a bit.

Steve: As far as I can remember that is about it and that was a day that I have never seen so many airplanes in my life and guess what there were very few German airplanes around.

Geoff: Is there one more thing you'd like to tell us? Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you'd like to tell us?

Steve: Not off hand. I think I've told you quite a bit there – the hospitals. I had special nurses who watched me day and night.

Oh one more thing – in the hospital a Colonel said “I don't want you guys to tell any jokes tonight because we've got a man here that is very ill. He might make it or he might not tomorrow morning”.

I said, “What the hell is he talking about?”

So that night it was so quiet and that the next morning I was alive.

Geoff: He was talking about you?

Steve: Yes.

Wife: By the way, can I say something? Steve never talked about this war and we'd been married for a long long time until 1994 when he got that call.

Sally: Bushnell hospital was an amputee hospital and they had prisoners of war there as well. Did you have any encounters with POW's?

Steve: POW's were there, Germans were there it was an Indian school after we left there but while we were there it was one of the biggest hospitals in America for amputees.

Geoff: You're laying there wounded, tell us a little more detail about when the Germans came up to you.

Steve: The Germans came up to me and they were eye to eye and Medic said, “Leave this man alone”. Eye to eye and I could see their eyes and they had a gun right at me, all of them and the Medic told them to leave me alone because I was heavily wounded and they took off. That's the day that I respected the Germans. They don't come and do other things like the Japanese do.

Sorry but that's it. I mean the Japanese are good people by the same breath, they're different kinds of people. The Germans were good. In fact most of the Germans married Greeks.