

Soldier Sanders Interview

Mr. Sanders grew up with his father in Oklahoma after his mother died in childbirth. Soldier's uncles had been soldiers in WWI. When they saw him as a newborn that said that one day he would grow up and be a soldier too so he was given the name of "Soldier". His first language was Cherokee. He recalled the boarding school days at Tallequah – "The Indian schools were like a family. It was also like ROTC with marching all the time".

When the war came he was teaching at Sequoyah as was his wife, . She explained that the Cherokee are raised to be warriors "American Indians are very patriotic and oriented to the military. In boarding school students were always marching. They even learned Morse code. Our two sons were both in the service. It is innate – almost built in. It is food at the Cherokee table" Mr. Sanders said "An Indian can go to war and come back home and not need psychiatric treatment" because they know how to handle it psychologically.

The Sanders married on March 19, 1941. Mr. Sanders was drafted and sent to England. Not long after that Mrs. Sanders gave birth to their first child, Karen. Mr. Sanders went to England on the Queen Mary which had been converted into a troop ship. He recalls the different soldiers he worked with that lots of them called him "Chief". He said that lots of American Indian boys were generically called that.

He signed up for tournament Basketball which was run by the Red Cross to increase soldier morale. Mr. Sanders was very good but after a while he thought to himself "I did not come here to play basketball. I came here to help win the war." So he asked to be taken off the tournament team and sent out on upcoming missions. He was a gunner in a new type of formation for "blanket bombing". He was assigned to the Pathfinder Group, a special outfit that provided lead aircraft in overcast weather for the new technique of blanket bombing. "It was interesting but the missions weren't coming fast enough. So I transferred to the 390th Heavy Bomb Group near Framingham. On May 28, 1944 over Majdeberg 2 engines and the left wing were on fire. They lost seven flying fortresses that day. They would off in groups of 4 with 3 groups for 12 B-17's.

There were 10 on the plane that day with 4 officers (pilot, navigator, bombardier, waist gunner, top turret gunner, bottom turret gunner and a radioman). "We all ejected and parachuted to the ground. I counted all 10 parachutes as we floated down." As soon as he hit the ground, he gathered up his parachute and started running for a place to hide. He found a tree and climbed up. The villagers heard the plane crash and began to look for them. Mr. Sanders thought he was well hidden but after a bit he saw a little boy at the base of the tree pointing up at him. Slowly, each of the flyers were found and rounded up. One of the ten (the radio man) was beaten by an enraged farmer. (Soldiers daughter Raven explained that this was the village the soldiers were bombing).

They first went to Frankfurt where they were interrogated. Mr. Soldier wouldn't tell them anything but his name. They got put on a truck and then onto trains. They were put in Stalag Luft IV. He recalled the guards were mostly older men. The prisoners would sit around playing cards and catch all day. Someone played a guitar and an Italian Tenor (Mr. Vershonee?) sang all

the Christmas songs including “Silent Night”. It made them all homesick. Mr. Sanders did not have any work to do and recalls that there was little food to eat – mostly potato peelings – until the Red Cross came and brought packages.

During this time his wife was living in Cherokee, North Carolina. She recalled getting a telegram saying that he was “Missing in Action”. Later she got a letter saying that he was taken prisoner. After three months, she got a letter that read, “I am fine. Hope you and the Baby are doing ok”. Later she received some Vmail. Each night Karen would kiss her Daddy’s picture good night.

Later they went to a camp in northern Germany. The Russians began to advance so they went by rail to Nuremberg. When they were moved again it was a forced march. Mr. Sanders partnered with another prisoner to escape. “One night we took ‘French Leave’”. They would walk during the night and sleep during the day. It must have been in the spring as there was no snow. He recalls being fed and helped by German villagers. They were going up and down the Danube trying to find a way across. The bridges were heavily guarded. After two weeks, he saw an advanced guard of Patton’s army. He couldn’t shout to his friend so they got separated. They ran into Patton’s army several days later He recalls being put into a French hospital and taking side trips to area attractions. He had lost lots of weight.

When it was time to go home he came home on a supply ship. “I did not want to fly and I haven’t been in one since the day we were shot down”. He first went to Fort Bragg and then to Cherokee by Trailways Bus. Karen was 2 ½. The bus came in late. Everyone got off the bus but him – he was the last. Karen said to him – having kissed his picture every night “Are you my Daddy?”

(From another interview with Rubin Taylor – Mrs. Taylors, Rubin’s mother, was Karen’s babysitter)

Later they went back to Oklahoma where Mr. Sanders began to teach. He especially loved sports and coached basketball. He was also a Baker. He took college courses through the GI Bill at Northeastern and especially loved tennis. (Mr. Sanders has a house full of trophies on his sporting accomplishments especially golf). Later they transferred to schools in Cherokee to teach.

Years later Mr. Sanders attended one of the Reunion groups. He ran into the fellow escapee in Chicago who exclaimed, “I always wondered what happened to ‘Chief’”.