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Elmo Meyers Oral History Interview

Nicholas Neal, Interviewer

April 22, 2018

Nicholas Neal (NN): This is Nicholas Neal's interview with Elmo Meyers from Shipman, Illinois. So this interview is about the Cold War. Whenever I say the word "Cold War," what's the first thing you think of?

Elmo Meyers (EM): Stalin.

NN: Stalin, can you-

EM: Joseph Stalin, the leader of Russia. He started the Cold War at the end of World War II.

NN: Alright, do you remember how the fear of Russia affected everyday life, like just your normal life?

EM: How the fear of it?

NN: Yeah, the fear of the U.S.S.R.

EM: I never ever feared it. We were always a superior power to them, I never really feared it. I just, when they started dominating all of Eastern Europe, and splitting Germany in half, ya know, East Germany and West Germany, and then took over the, uh, not Scandinavia, I can't think of it. But anyway Romania, Albania, Hungary and all that, and put up the Iron Curtain, well I uh, we didn't really fear him, we just hated him because he enslaved basically so many million people. And had a communistic way of life which is so much different than ours. But I never did fear him.

NN: Alright, do you remember doing anything in school dealing with the U.S.S.R., like any duck and cover drills or anything like that?

EM: In the school doing what now?

NN: Like drills, just for safety if the U.S.S.R. would ever...

EM: Yeah, yeah, we had a few drills once in a while for atomic blasts. But again, I don't know, it was just something that was mandatory to be done, but I don't think anybody ever really took them seriously, because, and again, we weren't necessarily afraid of 'em. Truman kinda put the

law down to Stalin pretty early. I don't know, I don't know maybe if you want to hear this in the interview or not, but he was gonna march into Turkey right after World War II when he took over them other countries, and Truman told him he had 24 hours to get his troops outta Turkey or he was gonna bomb him with another nuclear bomb. So he pulled his troops out and after that, it wasn't us afraid of him, he was afraid of Harry Truman. Because Truman was gonna kill him, and, you know, gonna bomb the hell out of him. So I don't know that we ever feared him. The day after they got the nuclear, the atomic bomb, we still had, just as we are today, we are so much superior in power. They were a lot like North Korea today. They're not gonna do anything, and Russia wasn't gonna do anything back then because in 15 minutes there wasn't gonna be a Russia left. We'd have them wiped off the face of the earth.

NN: Alright, and what was your reaction when the Berlin Wall fell?

EM: When it fell?

NN: Yes.

EM: Yeah well, I was happy to see it fall, yeah. I was stationed in Germany for a couple years, and we weren't allowed to go to Berlin. But we could go to Western Germany, but not into East Berlin, into Berlin, because it was a divided city. I was glad to see it come down. It was basically the end of the Cold War after Stalin died, and Krushchev and a bunch of em, you know [inaudible]. Gorbachev come in, a reasonable man, hell of a lot more reasonable than the guy they got in there now, Putin. But Gorbachev knew that, he was smart enough that he knew that he had to coexist with the rest of the world, and the Cold War was getting them nowhere. They were a backwards country, a poor country. They had no free trade, free commerce like we have here. They couldn't go into a grocery store and buy meat if there was any. There was bread made, borscht, I think that's beets. So Gorbachev had seen the state that his country was in and the people were in. So I think it was Reagan, I think Reagan was president, well yeah I know he was. They got along pretty good. Of course then the Cold War ended, but its fired back up now, with uh, not necessarily Donald Trump, I'm not gonna say that. It's escalated a little bit the last few years since Putin became in power. He's the one to reestablish the old Soviet Union. When he went into Crimea a couple of years ago and tried to kinda start a revolt in Ukraine. He basically wanted to reestablish the old Soviet Union, its not gonna happen, they're not gonna go back to that. They're enjoying their independence too much from the Russian way of life. What else?

NN: I just have one more question. Do you remember anything about the space race, and if so, what?

EM: Oh yeah, yeah, now that was interesting. I think, I know I was, and I think probably 99 percent of the country was. We were shocked when we found out Russia had fired off Sputnik into space and orbited the Earth because, you know, we just didn't imagine that they were capable of that kind of technology. Now there again, I'm not gonna say we feared 'em. There was

a lot of rumors going around that they could fire lasers among things from outer space, and target us, and nobody believed it. I mean, a certain amount of people believed it. People with, I'm gonna say average intelligence, didn't believe it. So we really weren't scared, but shocked. Then of course Kennedy started our space program, and we passed Russia in no time, put a man on the moon. They still haven't yet. Putin says he's going to in the next three years. He's planning on putting someone on there, but they are so broke, I don't know where the hell they're gonna get the money. But I imagine they got the technology to do it. Yeah our space race, was uh, that was fun. That was fun. They sent monkeys up. We sent monkeys up. They sent dogs up. We sent dogs up. And I remember our first testing, you know, firing down range. I think, I'm pretty sure Alan Shepard was the first one to orbit, not orbit but, to be fired down range. I think he broke the gravitational line, whatever I'm trying to say. But he came back down into the ocean. The first several were fun because they parachuted them into the ocean, you know and, we had ships out there trying to pick 'em up. Sometimes they landed quite a bit further away from the ships than it was intended. But it was fun. I don't think, again, I don't ever remember being feared of Russia, never. I don't even know that I ever respected them as far as a military power. When you've gotta have a parade down the middle of your town to show off your weapons, you haven't got any weapons. That's why we never necessarily had a parade. And if we had one, that's alright. I'm not gonna say one way or the other, but we don't need one. We know what we got. He knows what we got. They're not gonna, I don't know. It's a cat and mouse game. Always has been. It's just, you know, playing checkers with one another. I dare you to jump me, and I'm gonna jump you back, and one thing and other. Yeah the space race was fun. Especially once we got ahead of them.

NN: Alright

EM: Okay?

NN: Yeah, yeah. Thank you very much.

EM: Is that it?

NN: Yeah that's it.