

The National Museum of the Pacific War

Nimitz Education and Research Center

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with:

Dietrich Braun

Growing up in Germany during WWII

January 21, 2021

Today is November 10, 2021. My name is Ed Metzler. I am in Burnet, Texas to interview Dietrich Braun concerning his experiences during World War II and thereafter. This interview is in support of the Nimitz Education and Research Center archives of The National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission, for the preservation of historical information related to World War II. Dietrich, I want to thank you for taking the time to visit with me and telling of your experiences during World War II. I would like to start by asking you when and where you were born.

Braun: I was born in Göttingen, Germany, December 10, 1932.

Metzler: Where is that located in Germany?

Braun: A little bit West of the North Central part of Germany. It was a university city where my father was getting his degree.

Metzler: You father did what for a living?

Braun: His main work was rocket science for Germany.

Metzler: Where did he get his degree from?

Braun: Gottingen.

Metzler: Right there.

Braun: Yes.

Metzler: And what did your mother do?

Braun: She took care of me and my brothers and sisters.

Metzler: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Braun: I had two brothers and two sisters. I am the oldest.

Metzler: Are they in Germany or did they come to the United States as well?

Braun: I will cover all of that a little bit later.

Metzler: Ok. Did you go to local schools when you were a young child in Germany?

Braun: We lived on the outskirts of Berlin and later on Brunswig.

Metzler: Where is that located in Germany?

Braun: About half way between Hanover and Berlin.

Metzler: Is that a small town?

Braun: It is a fair-sized city. My father worked in Tangermunde.

Metzler: When you were a young lad going primary school, you were about seven years old. The war started in 1939. Do you remember things changing a lot after the war started? Your family life and everything else.

Braun: I have forgotten a lot, but I do know that we did not have a car but my father did have a motor-cycle. Soon after the war started a call came out that the military needed all of the motor-cycles as well as automobiles. So, he donated his and the last we heard it was in Poland.

Metzler: So, he donated his motor-cycle to the German military and when did your father get involved in the rocket program for Germany?

Braun: Even before the start of the war. It was always secret work and I never knew much about it until he started working for the United States.

Metzler: That was at the end of the war.

Braun: Yes. His main work was in Braunschweig, Germany. It was a Top-Secret location and when the Allied ground forces came up to the fence they said, "What's this?". They had no idea that it existed.

Metzler: This was in Braunschweig?

Braun: Yes.

Metzler: You said that you were in Tangermunde for a time.

Braun: I don't remember that. I only know that the British only found out about Tangermunde after an accident happened. The Germans were transferring liquid oxygen to Tangermunde by rail and the accident happened in the woods and as a result the whole area was covered by snow during the middle of summer. My dad told me about that

Metzler: That was fairly early during the war years.

Braun: Yes.

Metzler: So, what were those early school years like? Were you happy? Was home life good? What was life like in Germany?

Braun: I take life as it comes. My feelings really didn't matter. It never has.

Metzler: Well, that makes things easier.

Braun: Well, that's the way I approached it and I am proud of it.

Metzler: Were you a good student?

Braun: I was a good student. Yes. During that time, Hitler had moved the families with children out of the big cities into the smaller towns. We spent some time in Seesen while my father was in Braunschweig. When World War II was over, he wanted to know what happened in Seesen, our town.

Metzler: Where is that located?

Braun: In the Northwest corner in the Hartz Mountains.

Metzler: I have been to the Hartz Mountains. It is a lovely countryside.

Braun: We spent a number of war years there living in a house designed for two families with four families living there. It was a small town and it didn't get bombed very much. In fact, the only bomb that was dropped did a fair amount of damage because it hit half way between the gas manufacturing and the coal supply. Germany manufactured gas from coal. When the bomb hit everything up hill did not have gas and as the water

came from the mountains, everything down-hill did not have water. It was not a big bomb but it did that much damage.

Metzler: What was your family's view of Hitler?

Braun: You had no choice.

Metzler: It didn't matter what your view was.

Braun: No, it didn't. Now, after the war, my father wanted to find out what had happened to us. It was about a thirty-mile trip so he got on his bicycle and he started to head westward. Now, there were a lot of displaced people who had been in Concentration Camps and Prisoner of War Camps and they were all trying to get back home. So, when he would come up to a group at an intersection he would put on a beret and yell "Viva la France." He was pretending to be a Frenchman headed toward home.

Metzler: So, he was acting the part of a Frenchman, to help him get through.

Braun: Yes. He was convincing enough.

Metzler: Was there a lot of rationing of food, fuel, wood and that kind of thing in Germany, during the war?

Braun: Yes. There was a lot of rationing. I don't know how they rationed the coal to heat the apartment houses. In most of the private homes, we heated with a heating unit in the room that was built using with fire-brick and glazed tile.

Metzler: And you fired these with coal and wood?

Braun: Yes. With coal or wood. In fact, that reminds me that my brother and I, being the two oldest, we would have to go to the forest to get wood to heat and to cook.

Metzler: So, there was enough wood for everybody.

Braun: There was enough to get by.

Metzler: Now you mentioned the one bomb that hit in the area you lived; did you often hear the Allied aircraft that were headed toward the larger cities?

Braun: We spent many a night in the basement of the house we lived. For hours we would hear the bombers flying over, wondering which city would get it this time. Large parts of Braunschweig were destroyed by regular bombs and incendiary devices in one or two nights.

Metzler: The British came by night and the Americans by day, right?

Braun: All I know that it was day and night.

Metzler: Did you ever get involved in the Hitler Youth Corp.?

Braun: I had no choice. The German Youngsters (Deutsches Jungvolk) was for boys from six up to twelve. Then you went into the Hitler Youth which was for ages twelve to eighteen (Hitlerjugend). Let me show you a couple of pictures.

Metzler: We are looking at copies of photographs of Braunschweig before and after the war and the damage that appears is extraordinary. You have quite a collection of documentation here.

Braun: I have a book that these pictures came out of.

Metzler: Tell me about how you got pulled into the Hitler's Youth thing and what you did. What they did with you.

Braun: I did very little. We marched and took basic military training and participated in competitive sports. That is about all I can remember of it.

Metzler: The others were old enough, as the war went on, to actually get pulled into an active military roll.

Braun: I was not old enough at the time. Near the end of World War II, they rounded us up and they put us on German Military trucks. They took us to some farm where we spent two or three nights in a barn. Some how or other and I can't for the life of me remember how; but we got back home. I believe the original purpose of being there was to teach us how to use military weapons. That is what I think it was.

Metzler: Were you separated from your family at this time?

Braun: Yes.

Metzler: How did you feel about that? Were you worried, scared, patriotic? What was going through your mind?

Braun: That is the way it was and you just accepted it. Really, what choice did you have? If my father had not joined the Nazi Party he probably would have been executed or imprisoned. You did what you had to do to get by. We had pretty strong respect for the SS (Schutzstaffel) paramilitary unit and the Gestapo (Secret State Police) and all of that.

Metzler: More of fear than respect, huh?

Braun: You could call it fear; although I was never actually threatened. I had some friends who had relatives that disappeared at night and were never heard from again. And that kind of thing.

Metzler: But your family came through unscathed?

Braun: Yes. I credit God with that. It could have been completely different.

Metzler: Now, during the war, you really weren't with your father that much. He was away a lot.

Braun: He was living in another town doing his work. His specialty was Rocket stability and controls.

Metzler: Did he work directly with Wernher Von Braun?

Braun: Not directly with him but indirectly, yes. But there is no family relationship, that we know of.

Metzler: You do have the same family name but no Von.

Braun: We were not nobility. After the war was over, the Allied ground troops found the safe which held all of the personnel records in. They knew immediately who was who. This was in 1945. I later found out that during the war, on that base, they had a detail of

men that did nothing but moved the dairy cows around. So, they would not be in the same pattern from one ariel photo to the next.

Metzler: That is really camouflage, isn't it?

Braun: That is nothing. What was really camouflaged was the underground rocket firing range and the super-sonic wind tunnel that they had on that base.

Metzler: Which base is this now?

Braun: I don't know what it was called.

Metzler: Ok. Now, this was where your father worked. Correct?

Braun: Yes, this was where he worked.

Metzler: Was this base close to the Hartz Mountains?

Braun: Yes.

Metzler: I am now looking at a map of Germany during the war and it shows some of the places you lived and where Tangermunde is. It also shows Mittelwerk where they had a rocket factory underground. There was also a Concentration Camp near Mittelwerk that provided slave labor for the rocket factory.

Braun: That is correct. The name of the Concentration Camp was Dora.

Metzler: Did you ever see the Concentration Camp yourself?

Braun: No. I did see the inmates after the war as they were freed from the camp, and they were being renourished. Our mother took us by there as she wanted us to see that.

Metzler: Was that emotional thing, to see that?

Braun: It must have been because about six or eight years ago here I ran into a CD entitled The Boy in the plaid pajamas. I wish I could find it again as I would like to buy it, but I haven't found it since. When I saw that, it really got to me.

Metzler: Tell me what you recall when the Allies first came through where you and your family were living. At the end of the war.

Braun: Ok. There was no fighting in our area. The German military had pulled out they had their guns but no ammunition. So, on April 10th when the Allies actually came in, I remember standing and seeing trucks and tanks pass one after another for hours. If anybody had tried to blow something up, they would have been gone.

Metzler: Were these British or American?

Braun: American.

Metzler: Did you have any inter-action with the Americans, at that time?

Braun: No. I was hiding in the house, not to be noticed.

Metzler: Did they come up to the house or just go by.

Braun: No. they just went by. They were just coming to conquer the territory. Just before that happened, I had been to town with some other people to try and buy some food and suddenly the window behind broke. I looked over my shoulder behind us and there was a girl clerk with a blood streak on the side of her head. It didn't do her any real harm but everybody scattered. A stray bullet from somewhere had hit her.

Metzler: So, nobody knew where it came from. It was just a stray shot.

Braun: Now the idea was to get as much food and things in German hands to prevent the enemy (US Allies) from getting hold of it. I don't know if that was common or not, but that is the way the Germans approached it.

Metzler: In war time, you never know what an invader is going to do and how they are going to treat you. Did you get stories of how the Allies would treat the civilians and was there any talk about whether to be afraid of them or not?

Braun: Basically, we were told not to trust them as we did not know how we would be treated. There were rumors going about mistreatment. The German school system was set up so

you went to school in the morning and in the afternoon, you were free to do your homework and play. Sometimes we would go play in the mountains and one day we heard an airplane come over. Now there had been rumors about gunners on the Allied aircraft gunning down civilians so some of us found a bench and we crawled under it so they wouldn't see us. I don't know if that tells you anything or not but there was a certain amount of fear.

Metzler: That is understandable as a war was going on. So that was within a few weeks of the German's surrender.

Braun: When the Allied troops came in it was April 10th which was my sister's birthday.

Metzler: So, when Germany surrendered

Braun: We didn't know about it.

Metzler: You didn't get the word.

Braun: No. Not that I remember. It took them two weeks until we heard. The radio was government controlled up until this time, of course. Two weeks after the Allied ground troops had come through our area the German news media announced that the Allies had reached our area.

Metzler: When did you first hear that Germany had surrendered?

Braun: I don't know. It was not a memorable event.

Metzler: When did things change for your family?

Braun: I told you about people trying to get back home and so on. We went back to Braunschweig to be with my dad. I need to tell you about his situation. He knew that there was no more rocket work for Germany so he got a pick-axe and a shovel and started to help clear the roadways in the railyards to enable the trains to run again. An Army Air Force Captain contacted him and said, "Do you want to work for the U.S.?" They made him an offer and told him that his family would be protected and the family would receive double the food rations that the regular German families received. He

was one of the first six that they brought to the United States in Operation Paper Clip. He was located in the British zone, Britain said, "Wait a minute we want to know what Gerhart Braun knows." He took his shirt and toothbrush to England and six weeks later they let him back out.

Metzler: Let him back out? Did he come back to Germany?

Braun: He came back to Braunschweig and then he was flown to America. To Wright-Patterson.

Metzler: You said he went to England for six weeks and then they flew your father and other scientists to Wright-Patterson.

Braun: I have a copy of the contract where they agreed to provide him with 2500 Calories per day for each child. I don't know it was for the adults. In order to do so, they moved the family to Randshut, Bavaria which was in the British-American Zone. We were put into a house that had been confiscated from other people. I never ran into any problems with the anyone objecting to that.

Metzler: They ousted the people who lived and set your family up there and guaranteed you enough food to be happy. Twenty-five hundred Calories is pretty good.

Braun: Especially when you consider 900 Calories for adults and 1200 for kids on the German ration cards.

Metzler: That is starvation rations.

Braun: That is close.

Metzler: What do you remember about that period of your family life?

Braun: In Mansude the Americans had set up a housing project for people like us. There were about forty or fifty families like us, at that time. We were not in that group as we were in individual houses. We attended school there and one fellow and I had the job of pulling down the steps on the back of Six-by (Army truck) so the younger children could get on and off at school. We would do this every day.

Metzler: How far was this from Braunschweig?

Braun: I have no idea.

Metzler: It was not in the immediate area?

Braun: No. we were closer to Munich.

Metzler: Did you go into Munich?

Braun: How would we go? We didn't. We rode bicycles, if you had one. And that was it. It was not like America.

Metzler: At this point is your father in the United States and your family is still in Randshut?

Braun: Yes.

Metzler: Did you hear from your father? Did you know if he was ok or what?

Braun: He would send us CARE packages. He would send all types of things food and things like that he sent a bunch of little things like cigarettes. There was always a list of the contents and almost always cigarettes were included. Of course, cigarettes were a big thing on the black-market. You would use cigarettes to barter for other things that you wanted.

Metzler: How long were you there before you and your family were able to come to America?

Braun: About fourteen months or so.

Metzler: Did one of the parts of the contract, that your father signed, designate that his family would also be coming to America?

Braun: He was promised that we would be brought over within a year.

Metzler: Did you know you would be coming to the United States or not?

Braun: I did not know a lot of the details. In November of 1946, we got on a military truck and went to Bremerhaven and from there by way of the Henry J. Gibbons we were smuggled into the us. There was not immigration quota for the enemy.

Metzler: How did that work. When you came to the U.S.?

Braun: I know that I had a yellow tag on my neck that said that I was War Bride. We were on the USS Henry J Gibbons, which was a Liberty ship, and it came into New York harbor. We were locked down below deck so we did not get to see the Statute of Liberty. It took a couple of days to get the rest of it arranged. We finally got off the ship onto an Air Force bus. It took us to Pennsylvania Station and we waited for our train. We had strict instructions not to talk to anybody especially the news media.

Metzler: Could you speak any English at this point of your life?

Braun: I could speak some English. I know that on the ship, my mother sent me to see if I could buy some candy for the other kids. I finally got together with one of the clerks and we communicated with sign-language and words. I got the candy.

Metzler: Could your father speak English at that time.

Braun: His English was worse than mine.

Metzler: And your mother?

Braun: She could speak a little English.

Metzler: You are smuggled into the U.S. and put on a military bus. Where did you go next?

Braun: The family spent six or seven years at Wright-Patterson. I left the family in 1951 and went to Miami University in Ohio.

Metzler: By that time, your English was much better.

Braun: It didn't take long. When you are in Middle School and don't know how to talk the language, you learn very quickly.

Metzler: What kind of housing arrangement did you have at Wright Patterson?

Braun: It was an area separated from the main camp and it was called the NYA Camp. It had been set up as a National Youth Administration camp prior to the war. It was used for our families. There was another housing unit where others lived. I found basically it

was a lot easier for me to learn English than it was for the kids in the other housing area for we were forced to speak English.

Metzler: How did your family adapt to the new situation.

Braun: It was hard for me to tell but we adapted pretty well. When we came to Wright-Patterson it was December 4, 1946. When school started my father said, "I know where the school bus stops. You get on it and go get registered in school." The school bus was run by the military. I rode to school with General Nathan Twinning's son. I remember him because he was such a nasty kid. I went to Oakridge Middle School.

Metzler: Did you play any sports.

Braun: No.

Metzler: Did you study hard?

Braun: I studied as I needed to. It was fairly easy for me.

Metzler: Your youngest sibling was how old, when you came to America.

Braun: She was three years old. She had developed an infectious disease on the ship and they put her in quarantine so they wouldn't let her join the family. That still bothers her.

Metzler: Where does she live now?

Braun: Oxnard, Calif. She is always afraid of being left alone. You take a three-year-old, that is trying to learn to speak German and she is trying to communicate with nurses that only speak English, it makes it very frustrating. Even today, she does not like to be alone.

Metzler: Did you have a lot more involvement with you father after you came to the U.S.?

Braun: No, not much. He was sworn to Secrecy consequently; he did not talk about his job.

Metzler: But he lived with your family.

Braun: Oh, yes. Being independent all his life, my dad bought a lot near Wright-Patterson and we started to build a house on it. To make it the cheapest way possible, we made

concrete blocks with which to build. It got to be such as task he finally went ahead and bought them.

Metzler: Could you tell if he was happy, content, fulfilled, frustrated? How did his experience go in the Rocketry Program in the U.S.? Could you tell?

Braun: Well, he spent a lot of his time at his desk. And due to the secrecy, he did not talk about his work very much. I know that he went on several field trips to. No, it was in Germany that he went on a trip to watch the launching of a rocket. He told me later that the rocket went so high that, the sun had been down two hours, and it went so high that it was in bright sunlight again.

Metzler: Of course, the V-2 was the model for the Redstone Rocket which was developed by the U.S.

Braun: It all started at Wright-Patterson. Then it went off to the Pacific Missile Range and he worked there for a while. That was at Vandenberg. Then he went to Tennessee to Arnold Air Base. Arnold Research Center. He retired from there. I believe that this was in the later seventies or early eighties. I don't remember exactly.

Metzler: So, you went to the University, Miami of Ohio. What did you get your degree in?

Braun: I have a Bachelor of Science in Architecture.

Metzler: Do you practice Architecture?

Braun: Yes. I have worked all over the country. After I graduated, I went to Covington, Ohio and my father went to Arnold Research Center in Tennessee. He retired from there. Part of that time he spent in Huntsville, Alabama.

Metzler: Now he wasn't military, was he?

Braun: No, he was a civilian contractor in order to pay him what they wanted to pay him, he had to be a contractor. He couldn't be an employee anymore.

Metzler: Did you ever go back to Germany?

Braun: I have gone back several times. This was later in my life. We have a daughter who was in the military and she was stationed in Germany, with her husband. We went to visit them in 1969. I was there again in there in the winter of 1989-1990 and I helped take down the Berlin Wall. I rented a sledge hammer for five dollars an hour.

Metzler: How did it feel to help knock down the Berlin Wall?

Braun: My wife and some friends were with us. I brought home some little pieces of. Like I have told other people, I can't ever remember laughing out loud at something funny. I have always been serious. In the winter during the war we collected wood for cooking and heating. I almost cut my finger off while cutting wood. I didn't go to the Doctor, we just wrapped it up and went on.

Metzler: Did you say your daughter was stationed in Germany?

Braun: Yes.

Metzler: Was she bi-lingual?

Braun: More or less.

Metzler: Did you teach her German?

Braun: No, we did not.

Metzler: When you look back on your life today, what do you regret the most?

Braun: I can't think of anything. God has always been on our side and we just accepted his blessings. I don't remember anything that I really regret.

Metzler: Is there anything that you wish you had done but didn't have the opportunity to do? If you had anything to do over again, what would you do?

Braun: I don't know.

Metzler: What is it that you look back on your life that you are most proud?

Braun: My work as an Architect.

Metzler: Well we will conclude our interview Dietrich and I want to thank you for taking the time to visit with us.

Braun: Thank you.

Transcribed by Floyd C. Cox

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San Antonio, Texas