

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
ROBERT BOTTS

1997

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Botts, Robert H. [b.1922], Oral History Interview, 1997.
User copy, 1 sound cassette [ca. 55 min.], analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.
Master copy, 1 sound cassette [ca. 55 min.], analog 1 7/8 ips, mono.

ABSTRACT

The Madison, Wis. veteran discusses his pre-war and World War II service as a tank commander with the 4th Regiment of the 6th Marine Division island hopping during the Pacific campaign. He talks about enlisting in the Marines because he wanted to serve in China, being issued supplies, guard duty at the Naval air station at North Island [California], and learning of the attack on Pearl Harbor. After being transferred to the 11th Defense Battalion he left for overseas in 1942. Landing at Guadalcanal Island, he comments on participating in the fighting for the island, effectiveness of training, bathing and washing clothes in a river, interacting with natives, and fishing using explosive charges. He worked with both Stewart and Sherman tanks, and compares the two tanks. Botts details his combat experiences on Guam including flooded foxholes, using Japanese weapons in a surprise night attack, having his tank set afire, and being wounded. Botts tells several humorous stories such as obtaining alcohol for the cook and celebrating Christmas with Ivory snowflakes. Also discussed is the landing at Okinawa, supporting infantry troops, and trading captured weapons and souvenirs with sailors. Included are his feelings about the dropping of the atomic bomb, discharge, recovery from service experiences, his reoccurring malaria, and use of the GI Bill. Botts provides details concerning reunions with members of his tank company.

Biographical sketch

Botts, [B. February 24, 1922] served with the 6th Marine Division. He served as a tank commander platoon head in Guadalcanal, Munda Islands, Florida Island, New Georgia, Southern Solomons, Ryuku Islands, Guam and Okinawa. He was awarded a silver star for action at Sugarloaf Hill in Okinawa after being shot eleven times.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells.
Transcribed by Jane Schneider, Wisconsin Court Reporter, 2003.

Interview Transcript:

Mark: Ok, today's date is October the 29th, 1997. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing an oral history interview this morning with Mr. Robert Botts, a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps during World War II.

Botts: Good morning.

Mark: [Sneezes] Excuse me.

Botts: It's my pleasure to come in.

Mark: Why don't we start by having you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor. Or let me rephrase that. You went a little earlier, at the most. What were you doing prior to your entry into the military?

Botts: Well, I was born and raised down in west-central Illinois, and my families were farmers down there, and after I graduated from high school, this is right after the depression, you couldn't even buy a job anywhere, and I went up to work for my uncle up in the Black Hills in Rapid City, South Dakota. And one evening, a Marine Corps recruiter come along and stayed there, and we chatted there, and I rode with him for three days back to Minneapolis, Minnesota, and they wouldn't let me in the Marine Corps then because I had tonsils, had to go home and get them taken out. They weren't just taking everybody then. And then in September of that year, why, I and a friend of mine went down to St. Louis, and out of nine people that were being interviewed, tested to join the Marine Corps, only three of us made it. They were even kicking them out for being color-blind at that time. That was in September 1940.

Mark: So your desire to join the Marine Corps, do you think it was more based on economics, or was it--[unintelligible] France had fallen by this time?

Botts: It was more economics.

Mark: Had you considered the fact that a war may be coming?

Botts: Never even thought about it. I joined the Marine Corps to go to China, but never did make it. [Laughs]

Mark: Now, so you discussed how selective they were. Why don't you just walk me through your induction process. You had to go for a physical somewhere and then take—

Botts: I went to St. Louis to the recruit depot down there and went through physicals, and then they sent us home and we had to go back in about 10 days, and the Marine Corps has always sent their people on Pullman cars, and one is a regular chair car train. Went through boot camp at San Diego, which is quite strenuous. You're issued two pair of shoes when you go in there, and they take very great pains in fitting their shoes, and in fact, you step up on a platform and you picked up a 50-pound weight in each hand and the doctor checked to see whether the shoes fit. But anyhow, I go to get my first pair of shoes half soled in two weeks, so you know how much we walk there. After boot camp, I was stationed at the Naval Air Station in San Diego, North Island. That's where all the carriers, Enterprise, Lexington, all those carriers come in. There was only a car detachment over there. And when they bombed Pearl Harbor, I was on guard duty at the Naval Air Station at the entrance to the harbor in the guard tower, and I thought the sergeant guard was just kidding, so I said, "Yeah, sarge, what you been drinking," and hung up, and he called me and said, "Oh, we're doubling the guards, they did bomb Pearl Harbor." And to back up just a little bit, I was on a consignment group of seven people to go to Pearl Harbor 10 days before that happened. I and one of the other people were pulled off on the other roster for reasons I don't--well, we went to another unit. But three of those five people that went over there were killed in Pearl Harbor in that bombing. So after Pearl Harbor, then let's see, they pulled us out of the Naval Air Station. Then we went out to Camp Elliot and we started the Ninth Marine Regiment, which is a combat unit, infantry combat unit. We got that pretty well going, then they split the NCOs [noncommissioned officers], and I had made corporal by then, and they sent a bunch of us to the West Coast--to the East Coast and we started the 29th Marine Regiment.

Mark: Is it Paris Island or something?

Botts: No, that wasn't Paris Island. That was out of New River, North Carolina. That was a brand-new base that they just had opened out there for training facilities. They're still using them, by the way. And there was a bunch of us in a tent, trying to horse around, and I come charging out of the tent and I hit a first lieutenant and knocked him right flat on his back in the sand out there in the compound. Helped him up, and he said, "Sarge, would you like to join the tanks?" And I said, "Well, there's no way I can get out of here, I just got into the unit, just assigned to the unit." He said, "I have a letter from the commanding general of this station that I can take any personnel from this station to start the new tank unit." So I got into tank, and that's what we went overseas with as 11th Defense Battalion and Tank.

Mark: I want to backtrack a little bit to your training. You were in very, very early, before Pearl Harbor.

Botts: Oh, yes.

Mark: And there are stories, in the Army, anyway, about soldiers training with broomsticks because there weren't enough rifles and trucks, a big sign saying "tank" on it. In terms of the equipment and all that sort of thing, what sort of equipment did you have when you went in, and was there an improvement in terms of the quality and the quantity of it as time went on?

Botts: We were all issued quick equipment--I mean, equipment. We were issued World War II 1903 Springfield 30.06 rifles, and we was assigned the rifle and that's what we kept. That's what I went overseas with, with that same rifle we were issued. That's what we used on the range. We knew how to shot, but everybody had plenty of equipment. And we had, well, the old .45 pistols that we carried, but that was before the days of the grand rifle, before the days of the carbine, the .30 caliber carbine, and so we had the old bolt action rifle. That's what we were shipped overseas with.

Mark: Now, you had apparently traveled somewhat, around the Midwest anyway, but basic training, the military experience, sort of brings people together from all different parts of the country, California or New York or whatever. Was that your experience when you got into the military? And if so, if you can perhaps describe some of the diversity of the United States as you experienced it through the military.

Botts: As part of personnel?

Mark: Yeah.

Botts: Okay. Well, everybody that trained in San Diego was usually from the Mississippi River west, in that general category. I don't know where the exact dividing line was. And we had people from all over the West, the Midwest and the Far West, and in fact, there's still about 20 of us in the company that get together about every other year for a reunion. They are from Florida, California, Texas, Oregon, North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois. I mean, you get a pretty good cross section of the country. And one of my best friends was from Michigan, and he got killed in Guam. So it's not a group that comes from a very specific area. Now, the Army is different because, like, these units are formed basically, a lot of them are formed from a guard unit like here in Wisconsin, and they'll probably be off in Wisconsin or maybe Illinois or blend over into Minnesota or Michigan a little bit.

Mark: So when did you ship overseas?

Botts: We left the day after Thanksgiving in 1942.

Mark: And where did you go to? Why don't you describe the voyage.

Botts: Well, we were loaded onto a Dutch freighter, and they took the

top two cargo holds and made troop quarters out of them, and there was four bunks high in each one and very little ventilation. The toilets were set up and they were rigged on a beam out over the side of the ship and you just dump it in the ocean as you used it. And we had no escort. We were all alone. We landed in Noumea, New Caledonia, on Christmas Eve. So we was out to sea for about a month.

Mark: That's a long time to be on a ship.

Botts: Yeah.

Mark: How did you occupy yourself?

Botts: Oh, played cards, and that's the first place I heard Bing Crosby's "White Christmas." As we crossed the equator, somebody up in the crow's nest had a box of Ivory Flakes and playing the record, just throwing out Ivory Flakes for snowflakes.

Mark: Any seasickness? This is one of the stories--
Both talking at once]

Botts: Oh, yes, a lot of them did. It didn't really bother me that much But when you leave the West Coast, you get those big swells out for quite a few miles, and I tell you, there's a lot of guys--and there's nothing worse than seasickness.

Mark: So what's at New Caledonia then? Why don't you sort of describe what you do to prepare for combat, and where did you finally--
[Both talking at once]

Botts: Well, there, we get into New Caledonia, and we were going to stay there, but then there was one of the troop transports, Army, hit one of the mines in the harbor out there. I guess the skipper refused to take on a pilot. And all those people were there, and so we stayed aboard ship there for a couple of weeks, and they had us, for doing nothing, at least help. We was running boats and loading all the rest of the ships and stuff in there. And so shortly after that, then in a couple of weeks, then we just loaded up, we went up the Guadalcanal then.

Mark: Now, the battle had been going on for some time.

Botts: In Guadalcanal?

Mark: Yeah.

Botts: Oh, yes.

Mark: So when you got there, what was the situation?

Botts: Well, we got in there and we got involved in the cleanup there, you know, knocking out little pockets of stuff that was left, and just kind of a search-and-destroy type of a thing.

Mark: So there were still Japanese units in the hills and the jungle—

Botts: Yeah.

Mark: --and you said [both talking at once].

Botts: Then we were head of defense battalion, and they were initially set up for coastal defense, and then those units was made up of the 155 rifles, that's long-range heavy artillery, and 90 millimeter antiaircraft batteries and 40 millimeters, and there was one tank company and a company of infantry, and then they put us over on the Florida Islands over there, and we were over there for, oh, I expect six months or better just as outpost duty, and there we lived right in--I had my tank platoon, and we were down in Lady Village there for about two months.

Mark: So do you recall the first time someone shot at you in anger?

Botts: Well, in a tank, you don't know. You can hear them hit, you can see the fire, you can sense the fire.

Mark: I'm just interested in your personal or emotional reaction to such a traumatic event.

Botts: Well, I suppose it would be something like if you are in a high school football game, just before the whistle blew, why, everybody was dancing, going on, but when things started, why, everybody settled back and you just took on your training, your pre-trained activities.

Mark: Do you think the training has a lot to do with coping with the situation?

Botts: You bet, it sure does.

Mark: Do you think it helped you-- [both talking at once]

Botts: Oh, yes. [unintelligible] Where were we?

Mark: We were talking about getting shot at.

Botts: Oh, okay. But then after everything starts, well, you just go back to your old training facilities. A good example of whether good training helps or not, after this thing started, you started getting replacements in to replace battle casualties and stuff like this, and it seemed like the replacements always took the brunt of the casualties. There's no rhyme or reason, as far as I'm concerned, why this happens unless you develop an instinct that you know when to duck and when to dodge or when not to and when to. We were all in the same situations, but it seemed like always the new people come on, that's when they would hear a shell go over, they would jump, and there's no use--after you heard that one, said, "That's the one that won't bother you anymore because it's gone." It's the ones that you don't hear that does the damage.

Mark: Yes, you were essentially just sort of hopping through the islands.

Botts: Yep.

Mark: I look at this list of campaigns you were involved in. Florida Island, New Gorge, Libby, Guam, Okinawa.

Botts: Well, in the early stages of the war, when we first got over there, we had the only tanks in the Pacific, so we worked with all the Marine units, all the Army units in our area. So when somebody got in a bind, and we'd have to go break it up. So I don't know, almost three years I spent over there, I spent a better part of eight months aboard ship, just going back and forth between spots, and then we took our whole units.

Mark: What sort of tank did you have, by the way?

Botts: Well, it was just like the one that you got up there in the museum.

Mark: It's a Stewart tank.

Botts: That's when we went--we took overseas with us. After that, then they start issuing us the Shermans.

Mark: Maybe you can just describe what it's like to be in there and then perhaps compare the Stewart and the Sherman from the perspective of a crewman.

Botts: Well, the crew in the small tanks, there was only four of us in it, and the armor wasn't all that great. We had a .130 caliber machine gun and 37 millimeter, a cannon. And in the Sherman, it was a much heavier tank. A small one weighed about 15 tons. And the Sherman weighed about 30 tons or better, and we had a lot more fire power. We had two machine guns mounted, and then we used 75 millimeters, and then we had also a flame thrower that was

mounted in there. We could replace one, remove one machine gun and put the flame thrower down there for burning out caves and stuff, and it was--well, we had had good ventilation. It was awful noisy, machine guns was awful noisy. It's hard on hearing and stuff. And you can tell when you get hit. I've been sitting inside--we got hit 11 times one day in Okinawa, and they was knocking off patches of enamel about 6 inches in the diameter on the inside, but none of them come through the crew compartment, but they did come in the transmission [unintelligible].

Mark: That was hit with what?

Botts: We was hit, 47 millimeter. It was a German 47 millimeter the Japanese had.

Mark: Now, in terms of the size of the group, I suppose the Sherman's got more people in it?

Botts: They had five.

Mark: What about the Stewart?

Botts: They only had four. They had a driver, an assistant driver, a tank commander, a gunner, loader. We had driver, assistant driver, tank commander, gunner, and loader.

Mark: It gets hot in there, I imagine.

Botts: It can be. We had good ventilation, by the way. It wasn't all that bad as far as heat was concerned. We had a good ventilation just to remove the smoke and stuff from the gunfire.

Mark: So this list of campaigns here, you know, I get different perspectives from different veterans. Are each of these island campaigns, do they all stand out as specific, or do they all sort of blend together?

Botts: Well, they all pretty much blend together in there because you land on the beach and you go through the jungle and you don't quit til you get to the other side, and that's the same true with all of them. Little bit different terrains, some of them, and some of them was a little heavier fortified than others, and Okinawa was the worst as far as fortification was concerned that I was involved in.

Mark: Maybe we'll take Okinawa, but in terms of the Guam and the Lebanese, were there any particular incidents that you recall that stick out in terms of the combat, the fierceness of it or lack of fierceness of it?

Botts: Well, in Guam we didn't know whether we even were going to get to stay the first three days. In fact, our foxholes was on the beach the first three nights we were there. High tide would come in and flood the holes sometimes, and one night, they broke through the lines that come in and they had three of our tanks on fire while we would park there, and we lost three people, and everything that was above grade was open season on, and the next morning, we got up and there was 23 dead soldiers and 93 dead Japs in our camp and we lost three people. And we had three tanks, they weren't destroyed, but they had to do quite a little bit of maintenance on them [unintelligible]. They were burned on the outside, from where they threw cocktails on them all, a set of cocktails. And then that was the second night. The third night, why, we didn't know whether we were even going to get to stay on there or not. Then we took all the guns out of the tanks and had them set up, and we knew there was going to be a big counterattack that night because you could hear them and they're getting all psyched up and everything. But during the course of the first two days, we had captured some of their weapons, their machine guns, and we found some of their ammunition. So when they counterattacked, we had to have set up about every third or fourth hole or where you were, and we opened up on them with their own weapons, and that threw them in such a state of turmoil, they thought they were charging their own lines, and then they ordered us back in the tanks right away, and it was just getting daylight, we couldn't hardly see, and we went out and it was quite a messy cleanup.

Mark: The battle of Okinawa was reputed to be particularly fierce. Did you get a sense of Japanese on islands--[unintelligible]. That's the legend. But your own personal experience, I know I can only ask you what you observed, but in what you observed, do you think that's true? Maybe just describe the Okinawa campaign for me.

Botts: Yeah, it was true. They made some gross errors.

Mark: The Japanese did?

Botts: Yes. By letting us get all organized before they ever offered any resistance in there. But we walked in there, there wasn't a shot fired when we landed on that thing, and we cut the island in two the first day, and of course, most of the stuff was in the southern part of the island anyway, but we had made kind of a fake landing on the other side of the island down for the south the day before, and then we come in and landed up on the north of that, up in that little neck up there. But our division took, oh, three-fourths of the island in the Sixth Marine Division. But there's some of them hills in there that was completely honeycombed. It was just like a big hotel in there. They had their own kitchen, their own recreation quarters, their own hospitals, crew quarters and everything, and then they had little tunnels that were dug come out and to the side of the hill, there would be like a little bush or something in there and you couldn't see them.

Mark: I suppose armor had to play a big role in flushing them out of there.

Botts: Well, it did, just to protect our troops and get them in there.

Mark: So in a battle like that, I mean, what is the role of the tank and armor?

Botts: Just troop support. And we're a little higher, we had a little better visibility, we could see things that's happening, and we had probably the best communication system at that time between all the other elements that was involved in there, like overhead aircraft, ships at sea, artillery, and this kind of thing, and then we had radio--or telephone communication between the infantry, we had a telephone line coming into the back of the tank, where they could get ahold of us, and we used the infantry for protection because we couldn't see within about a 35-foot range from the tank, we was pretty vulnerable if we was out by ourself. So we could call in artillery support or whatever, and air support, which we did quite often. But we set there, went out one day, this is on the Sugarloaf Hill, Okinawa, and I don't know how many days. We was out there every day. And then we went out one morning, and I had just pulled up in this valley between two hills, and I got clobbered with a .47. That's where I got hit the 11 times in there, and three penetration. We set there all day, and they used up most of my ammunition, and we knocked out three antitank guns where we was at. And so I had called for the retriever tank. They come out that evening to pick us up, and I opened the hatch, and getting back to the holes that was in the side of the hill, there had been somebody setting in there we hadn't seen, and when I opened the hatch, they started out. There was a bullet just missed my head and cut a groove right into the lid of the tank. But he didn't last long. We just stuck a white Foster shell up in the hole.

Mark: So was it in Okinawa that you received your Purple Heart-- [both talking at once]

Botts: No, no. I got that in Guam. I got another one when I was with the Army up in Munda Islands.

Mark: Oh, so you got a couple of them then.

Botts: Yeah.

Mark: Nothing that could keep you from fighting again.

Botts: No, no, nothing serious. Well, one of them could have been very serious, because we was knocking out machine guns up around the airport in Guam, and my gunner had got cramps in his legs, so we changed position so he could stand up in the tank commander's area, and I was down manning the gun,

so I lined up this machine gun and I was just getting ready to fire and he fired under the hole. It was smaller than a dime with a sight for the turret machine gun that goes through there, and a bullet come through that hole, caught me in the arm in there, and I had just moved my face away. If I hadn't moved it that particular instant, I would have been blind today. But there's still the whole shoulder full of little old black pepper-like shrapnel.

Mark: Well, I'll save the Japanese surrender for a little bit. Sort of describe the combat experiences. I'm sort of interested in what Marines do when they're not in combat. There had to have been long periods of time when, you know, between the island campaign—

Botts: Oh, yeah, training campaigns.

Mark: What did you do during the experience?

Botts: Well, it was just we made preparations for the next push we was going on, and we had basketball teams, baseball teams, we'd allow scuba diving in the coral reef around the islands. When we was over on the front Florida Islands, why, my tank platoon was stationed in a Navy village in there. There was forward observers. They did not have the radar then that we have today. I mean, they used line of sight and hearing, and we had to report all the ships we saw, all the aircraft we heard, friendly or foe, whatever, and we had a lot of fun in the Navy village in there.

Mark: One of the things I like to ask the veterans, if they had contact with the people in the port lands in which they served. In Europe, you know, you've got the French, and [both talking at once].

Botts: We never saw [unintelligible] all the time we was over there.

Mark: You never saw what?

Botts: We never saw a civilized town in almost the three years we was over there. Okinawa was the closest to it, but it was flattened. There was nothing there.

Mark: So how did you interact with the native people, like I'm thinking over in Florida Islands, I mean—

Botts: We got along—

Mark: Did they speak English, for example?
[Both talking at once].

Botts: Well, we got along. They used kind of a Pekin English type of

thing in there. The native chief in this village there, he had worked on freighters, Chinese freighters, and he knew a little bit of English. And by the way, he made me a cane while I was there, and I still have it 60 some--about 60 years ago. And they liked to fish. We soon learned that all of the bananas and the pineapples that was in the jungle up there belonged to somebody after we caught a bunch of bananas and got in a bunch of trouble. But I was in our tower one day, and I saw this Gullah tuna coming in the lagoon in there, so we used half pound blocks of TNT for fishing tackle over there. Now I know that's kind of illegal in the states, but it was very effective. And I hollered to some of the guys and I said, "Put four charges out in this bay out here because we got a bunch of tuna coming in here, we'll get the natives some fish." So the old chief then, they saw that and these guys grabbed their spears and they was going to go out in there, and the water was, oh, waist deep, a little deeper than that. So we had trouble keeping them out of the water, and when the main school of that tuna hit the beach or hit where I set that charge off, I told the chief, "Don't let them go out there." They finally just stuck their spears in the bottom in there and they went out and could pick up the fish, and we broke out some sandbags for them and they had filled, you know, 30, 35, 40 sandbags full of tuna, and they probably weighed 10 pounds apiece, in there. So for the next three days, we had a tuna roast. They just split those fish open and take the insides out, wrap them in banana leaves, and then they bake them in charcoal, and boy, were they delicious. But after that, we never carried another bucket of water, we always had fresh pineapple and fresh bananas and fresh papaya and all of the stuff sitting at our camp where we was at.

Mark: They took care of you then?

Botts: Oh, yeah. We got along very well with them.

Mark: Now, this was where?

Botts: Is was in the Florida Islands. All those little native villages have their own little dialect. You can get to learn to communicate with this village, maybe the next one, but the next one on down the line maybe two miles away, they had a different dialect.

Mark: I was going to ask, you sort of allude to this, American soldiers are apparently the targets for souvenir collecting. You mentioned you got a cane. Was there much of this sort of swapping and trading, that sort of thing going on with the natives?

Botts: Oh, the natives, they wanted clothes. You could trade a wore-out shirt for a whole bunch of bananas and that type of thing. Not the natives so much, where the swapping of souvenirs came in was between the combat troops and the noncombatants, like the Air Force people and sailors and this type of

thing.

Mark: And what did you trade back for it?

Botts: Well, like in Munda, we took that little airstrip, I found a hold in the control tower for the airstrip. I got a pair of binoculars with a stand, and they were 6-inch projective lenses.

Mark: Japanese binoculars?

Botts: Japanese binoculars. I got a whole case of brand-new Japanese rifles that was still in cosmoline, and I cleaned those up and traded with the sailors, and just miscellaneous odds and ends of stuff.

Mark: How do you get this stuff home?

Botts: Well, a lot of it you couldn't get home. I didn't bring home hardly any of this. Like my cane I got, I hauled out a bamboo pole and made a sleeve to set it in, put a wooden block in each end of it and shipped it home. And all of the stuff, you couldn't ship anything home without sponsorship. You had to get permission to do this. Like my brother, he was in Europe, and I got a card from him one time, and he said he couldn't get any cigarettes. We had a cigarette friend down here, he was over there, so I asked our company commander if I could send him some cigarettes, and he said, "Sure, go ahead, I'll mail them." So I put four carton of cigarettes in a little box. And by the way, we could buy cigarettes for 50 cents a carton.

Mark: I don't know what it is now. It was a dollar when I quit smoking. That was a long time ago.

Botts: He got the cigarettes later and he was in the hospital in Denver.

Mark: I had an uncle from the Marines in the Pacific. He was a cook, he wasn't in combat. I don't know if [unintelligible] in combat. Him and others mentioned this term "rock happy," which is being stuck off on sort of an isolated island with nothing to do. Are you familiar with that term?

Botts: Yeah, to a certain extent. But we created our own--a lot of—I can understand where the cooks, they had nothing to do but peel potatoes and cook beans, and they didn't have the outside activities like we did. I knew quite a few of the cooks in there. In fact, I didn't make too many points with this one cook. I knew he liked his booze, and he got to drinking vanilla extract, which is mostly whiskey--or mostly alcohol. So one day I went down and asked his old quartermaster sergeant, I says, "Hey, you got any of that vanilla that's oil-based?" He said, "Oh, sure," but he says, "It ain't any good." I said, "Well, the

cook wants a bottle of it anyway." Well, the cook didn't want it, I wanted it in there. So when the cook come out and said, "Where's my vanilla," so I had it in the jeep and I pitched it to him and then I took off. So he just took the cap off and took a big slug of that, and he could have killed somebody, drinking that oil. [Laughs] So we had a lot of fun along with it, too.

Mark: There was another veteran that came through here as a Marine Corps, physician, I think, and he gave us--

[TAPE 1 SIDE B BEGINS]

Botts: I heard about them, but never did see one.

Mark: I'm just wondering if people are really singing those songs and talk that way.

Botts: Oh, yes. It was pretty crude language, and it was difficult to forget it when you got home, because, I mean, it was just a matter of working it in your ordinary speech, you know.

Mark: So there's truth to that?

Botts: Oh, yes.

Mark: I'm not going to force you to repeat it.

Botts: No, no.

Mark: Not that you can shock me by it, the other generation.

Botts: No, no.

Mark: But that's true, in your experience?

Botts: That's true. In the Guadalcanal, that was our main training base was the Guadalcanal, and it was pretty well isolated from the women, and so we went down to the river and we just dripped off naked down there, and that's where we done our washing and our bathing and everything else until one of the doctors come, had four nurses in a jeep, and parked on the bridge and went across the river, watched us washing our clothes. So that put an end to that. We had a lot of fun along with it, but as far as the actual combat periods is concerned, most of them didn't last too long. In fact, on Okinawa, this was a rough one in there, we landed there on Easter--or April the 1st, and we left there on the 3rd of July, and we lost a bunch of people there, and I think I left five tanks there.

Mark: So you got these long periods of training and that sort of thing and then these really brief periods of combat?

Botts: Yeah.

Mark: Okinawa had to have been the last combat you saw.

Botts: Yeah. After Okinawa, we come back to Guam, and then I had been over there almost three years then, so they loaded us up and we headed home, headed back to the States.

Mark: So that was before the Japanese surrendered.

Botts: Oh, yes. If I'd have known the way things was turning out, the Fourth Marine Regiment went in and took the surrender. I stayed. But I figured that I had used up most of my luck on some of these things. But we were aboard ship about halfway home when the ship got the announcement that they had dropped the first atomic bomb.

Mark: What was your reaction and those around you? Did you understand what was going on?

Botts: Yeah, we did. We knew what those things--we didn't know--we had not been briefed or anything on atomic bomb because--but—

Mark: But you knew this was something different—

Botts: Oh, yes.

Mark: --this was just a big, big megaton—

Botts: And there's really no way that you could tell how many lives that saved, both Japanese and--[unintelligible]. I know it was messy and it killed a lot of people, but the Japanese were arming every man, woman, and child with something to ward off that landing on their own shores.

Mark: So then you were on ship when that happened.

Botts: Yeah.

Mark: That was August 6th.

Botts: Yeah.

Mark: The actual announced surrender time of VJ Day is August 14th or 15th.

Botts: 14th or something like that, yeah.

Mark: Were you back on shore by that time?

Botts: Yeah, we were back and quarantined in the Marine Corps base in San Diego, California, and they were tearing San Diego apart and they would not let us go to town.

Mark: I assume you had to have had some kind of celebration.

Botts: No. Well, we-- [both talking at once]. Well, what could you do? Oh, yeah, there was some in there, but see, we were quarantined for two weeks.

Mark: For what reason, just for tropical diseases?

Botts: Yeah, mostly. All of our troops that come back, they quarantined them until they checked them out to be sure.

Mark: So it was pretty standard procedure.

Botts: Oh, yeah, yeah. And of course, there was all kinds of fevers and stuff over there, all kind of insects, cruddy stuff in there. I had dengue fever once, that almost got me, and then I had a temperature of 105 for two or three days. I didn't know nothing for a week.

Mark: That was overseas somewhere?

Botts: Yeah, Guam. Malaria, I don't know how many times I had malaria, and those centipedes over there were about yea long and about that wide, and once one of them would bite you, why, they'd co me over and just give you a shot of morphine and knock you out because those things are really painful.

Mark: I want to come back to the disease and I want to talk about postwar adjustments, but before we do that, you probably ought to just go chronically. Why don't you just tell me about the process of being discharged. The war is over now and you've been in it for, like, four years, longer than most people.

Botts: I've been almost six years.

Mark: You're right. Were you offered a chance to reenlist? Did you want to [both talking at once]?

Botts: I had extended my enlistment when I was overseas because I knew I couldn't get out anyways, so why not take the 900 bucks and send it home, and my enlistment would have been up in November, in '46. And when I got back to the States, a field commissioner caught up with me. So then that kind of

muddied up the water a little bit. But I couldn't have got out anyway until my enlistment was up in November. But then I got a letter from Marine Corps headquarters, wanted to know if I want to apply for a permanent commission, and why would a gunny sergeant want to go in as a shaved-tail second lieutenant. I says no, I don't want to start all over in boot camp again. I'll just take my old gunny sergeant's rating back. I would have liked to have stayed in, but I just got married when I got home, and my wife said, "Well, you've been gone for five years, I don't want you to take off for another five." And I said no, I didn't want to apply for the permanent commission, and I just wanted my old gunny sergeant rating back because I'd like to go in for chief petty officer, not chief petty, warrant officer if I'd have stayed in. So shortly after that, then I got a notice there to use my acquired leave and go to Great Lakes Naval Training Station for discharge.

Mark: And you did.

Botts: Yeah.

Mark: And you got out of the service then.

Botts: Yeah. I got out February in '46.

Mark: So when it came to getting your life back on track now, in the postwar years, what were your priorities and what did you do to go about achieving those goals?

Botts: Well, really you're just like floating around like a leaf in the middle of a pond with the wind blowing, you didn't know what you want to do, and you weren't trained to really do anything, and you were very jumpy. Somebody could drop a pin. I mean, you was really tense.

Mark: Yeah. You experienced that?

Botts: Oh, yeah.

Mark: There's the old story from World War I and the young boys hid firecrackers behind the beds to watch them jump.

Botts: Yeah.

Mark: There's truth to that, you think?

Botts: Oh, yeah. Oh, it didn't bother me. I didn't let things like that bother me all that much, but your senses was so keyed up, well, slight defenses or something. I mean, like one guy said, your hearing is so acute that you could hear a pissant walk across the wet leaves, [laughs]. But, I mean, that's the way you are. I mean, you can wake up at--you could sleep, but even in a

sound sleep, if the slightest thing was there, you were wide awake and alert. Like over in the islands, they had a lot of land crabs, and one of them land crabs would go skitter by your foxhole. Well, you knew it even if you'd been napping a little bit.

Mark: And so when you get home then, these—

Botts: Oh, yeah.

Mark: --sort of a hangover effect.

Botts: Oh, yeah.

Mark: How long does that last?

Botts: Oh, it varies with the individual. Some people never got over it. But as I say, I tried not to let things like that bother me. And so when I got home, I went to work for my wife's parents on the farm. Well, that's kind of out in the open, kind of relaxed, no big pressure and that kind of stuff, and that helps a bunch.

Mark: So it sort of helped to depressurize, I suppose?

Botts: Oh, yeah. But, I mean, like if you'd have went to work in a factory, goodness, with a lot of noise and stuff, I think it would take them much longer.

Mark: I think "nervous out of the service" was the term you come across.

Botts: Yep.

Mark: You remember that term?

Botts: Yep, yep.

Mark: So it didn't last more than a couple months for you then?

Botts: I doubt it.

Mark: How did it affect your wife? I suppose she wasn't used to you jumping up at 4 in the morning looking for land crabs.

Botts: No. [Laughs] Well, no, I kind of got over that, but after a while, I was out in Quantico, Virginia then. We went out there in September, after we was married, and then we stayed there until in February the next year.

Mark: Now, in terms of the disease, while we're sort of on this sort of medical/emotional type of thing, you say you had malaria and dengue fever when you were overseas. Did you have relapses when you were back home?

Botts: Oh, yeah. When we was at Quantico, we had just checked in out there, and in fact, we were staying with a guy that I'd enlisted in the Marine Corps with, and he was gunny sergeant, and I had just gotten a commission, and I was illegal for being in his quarters and he was illegal for having me there, and I got this darn malaria, and the ambulance come and picked me up over there, and I was in the hospital for two weeks out in Quantico, Virginia. Then they had given me then some experimental medicine to kind of combat this malaria stuff and it was shots. I had to take one every day for two weeks, and I haven't had malaria since. I've had, you know, it felt like malaria. I got a 10 percent disability for malaria.

Mark: You still have that, by chance?

Botts: No. That was cancelled. I got disability for my shoulder wound, and hearing, 10 percent on each.

Mark: So we've covered sort of medical issues. Employment. When you got out, you said you worked on your father-in-law's farm, was it?

Botts: Yeah, for a little over a year.

Mark: Was that something you wanted to do?

Botts: No. It was just to fill in till I found out what I wanted to do. So then I applied for the--I went and talked to some people down at an appliance store.

Mark: This is near McComb again?

Botts: McComb. In McComb. And I went in there on the GI on-the-job training bill, and they furnished some tools. In fact, I still have some of them.

Mark: But now that's a little known fact. Everyone thinks of the GI Bill as the guys on campus. Vocational schools [both talking at once] on-the-job training and that sort of thing.

Botts: On-the-job training.

Mark: So you utilized the GI Bill in an on-the-job training situation?

Botts: Yeah. I didn't see that guaranteed. Well, then I was getting

50 bucks a week, period. I mean, that was it.

Mark: But this was what kind of business again?

Botts: Appliance, household appliances, refrigerators, wash machines, freezers, television sets. Well, they were just coming in then. They had radios and that kind of thing, toasters, coffeemakers. I done all the service work on all that stuff. And I worked for them for five years. And then after that, why, I went into work for a heating and air conditioning firm, and I worked for them for about seven years. And then they were building a new hospital down at McComb, and I got the job as a maintenance supervisor for that building. That's what I done till I retired. I had Madison General Hospital, engineering department for Madison General Hospital here in Madison for 25 years.

Mark: I was going to ask, how did you end up in Madison.

Botts: Well, how I ended up in Madison, I worked down there for two years, and the administrator left to come up here to the Methodist Hospital here in Madison, and his classmate had the Madison General Hospital at that time and he was looking for somebody, and so he recommended me for this job up here, so I come up.

Mark: So you came up in the '60s or sometime, 25 years?

Botts: 1959.

Mark: '59.

Botts: Yeah, I've been retired for about 15 years.

Mark: Yeah. One last question in terms of benefits. The GI Bill also had a home loan provision.

Botts: I used it twice.

Mark: Did you?

Botts: Uh-huh.

Mark: In Madison here?

Botts: No. I used it once in McComb and once in Galesburg, Illinois.

Mark: I don't want to pry into your personal finances or anything, but in terms of using the loans and how important they were to you, I'll just ask you this. Especially the first time, would you have been able to purchase property

had it not been for the GI Bill?

Botts: Oh, yeah, probably, because the reason I say that, because in Illinois at that time, they gave everybody a state bonus for being in the service. And I forget the form, but it was so much for the months that--a noncombatting area, so double that in a combat area, but I got a check for \$900, and that was a lot of money back then.

Mark: That's a lot of money now.

Botts: And we bought our first house with that check, but I did use the GI loan on that because we got a much better interest rate. And then so I still had some of it left, and then I got transferred up to Galesburg to another appliance dealer, and so I used it up there to buy a house. Then up there I got tired of him, went to work for the Admiral Corporation for two years in their quality control.

Mark: Well, I've just got one last area of questions, and that involves veterans' organizations, brought you through your medical readjustment, your sort of vocational rehabilitation, is the terminology. Now in terms of, like, social reintegration and veterans' organizations and that sort of thing, on the sheet that I had you fill out, you mentioned that you joined the VFW, VAB? When did you join those groups?

Botts: Why or when?

Mark: When.

Botts: Oh, I didn't join them till I got up here, and that was in 1960.

Mark: So you didn't join immediately after the war?

Botts: I joined the American Legion.

Mark: Right after the war?

Botts: Right after the war down there.

Mark: For what reason?

Botts: Well, just to join the thing. But those people didn't appeal to me at all.

Mark: Why is that?

Botts: Well, everybody would come in and it got to be more of a boozing

operation and party thing. They didn't seem to have any direct line of trying to accomplish anything.

Mark: What did you want to get out of it? Was it legislative?

Botts: Well, that. I joined the disabled vets in there, and they helped me apply for disability, like for my ears, but I did get the malaria stuff right after--the check almost beat me home when we were being discharged up at Great Lake, I had to wait on the bus to get out of there, and they had interview people setting there in the lobby, and this one little gal, she had me come over and sit down and wanted to know about disabilities and stuff, and she took a brief history of what I had been through and all this kind of stuff, and I'm qualified for disabilities in six different areas, in hearing, malaria, and the gunshot wound. But malaria was cancelled after I didn't have it for about 10 years.

Mark: Are you what you'd call an active member today?

Botts: Oh, yes.

Mark: Do you hold offices in the post?

Botts: Well, I have, but we're gone in the winter. We're down in Arizona in the winter all the time, and you can't hold an office in something like that and being gone four or five months a year.

Mark: That's true.

Botts: And before we retired and started going down to Arizona, why, I held a lot of the offices, and at the hospital engineers maintenance organization, I helped start the state chapter with that, and I'm still very active in that. In fact, I got to go Friday to an all-day meeting. I've been retired 15 years, but we got our membership committee meeting and our annual meeting coming up. We have an annual conference every fall, and this Friday we'll plan it for next September, so—

Mark: Those are pretty much all the questions I have. You've gone through my sort of list. Is there anything you'd like to add or anything?

Botts: Well, my son, he was in Vietnam, and he went back over to Okinawa, and he had some pictures of when he was there, and that's where they trained and set up. Okinawa was before they went into Vietnam. And we had a lot of fun taking the pictures that I had of Naha, the capital city, and trying to move things around, I showed him what it looked like when I was there, and then he had pictures of how they had rebuilt it.

Mark: Very much different, I would imagine.

Botts: Well, there was nothing standing when we was there. In fact, the streets was so narrow we couldn't even hardly get a Sherman tank through them. But then we both belonged to the VFW over in Middleton, and that's a real active group. They do a lot of good for the community.

Mark: Was your son, was he in combat, was he an amateur man, or—

Botts: Well, he was in a K-9 corps and they used the guard dogs. They had two rows of fence around the compounds, and those people worked between the two rows of fences to be keeping the Vietnamese from sneaking in there.

Mark: I just wondered if you compared notes between the two wars.

Botts: Oh, yeah.

Mark: I would imagine it's a topic-- [both talking at once].

Botts: Well, from what I could see of that, there wasn't a whole lot of difference in the type of warfare that they have. Now they had a lot more sophisticated weapons than we did, but the biggest problem that they had out there, the same way was in Korea, somebody drew an imaginary line across in there, and you couldn't touch anybody beyond that line, and you cannot win a war that way because it gives them a sanctuary to get into that you can't touch them, where we didn't have those kind of lines. When we hit the beach on an island, we never stopped until we got to the beach on the other end of the island and there was no holes barred or anything. And when you start tying one hand behind your back, I mean, it's a losing battle to start with.

Mark: Well, that's all I have. Anything else?

Botts: No, not really.

Mark: Well, thanks for coming in.

Botts: We used the natives a lot over there.

Mark: In terms of scouting and stuff?

Botts: Scouting and stuff.

Mark: That's an interesting topic of conversation, actually. You know, the people in Guam, they were American citizens by this time.

Botts: They were the happiest people you ever seen in your life, and I got out of the hospital there in Guam, I got hit in the arm, and the doc said, "Go out and get a little bit of exercise," so I was out walking around, and I come across this little compound down there. It was a couple little native huts and stuff. So I was kind of tired. I was talking to the guy, and he says, "Well, come on over and sit down." So we sat over and visit with him there, and he says, "You can't believe the torture and the tyranny that the Japanese have put on those people," and they were back up living in caves and stuff up in the mountains. While I was setting there, he called one of the kids out, and he was just a kid about so high, he skidded up a coconut tree there, and he kept pointing, get this one over here, and they brew their booze in the coconuts on the tree, and they opened up one hole in it and let it ferment, and you talk about top [inaudible]. But they were very happy people when we got out of there.

Mark: Have you had a chance to go back to the Pacific? [Both talking at once].

Botts: I wanted to go back over to the 50th anniversary of Guam so bad, but the situation at that particular time, I just couldn't get away to do it.

Mark: It's expensive. That's a long ways away.

Botts: You bet. Well, they had some pretty good programs set up in there.

Mark: For the vets, yeah.

Botts: Now there's four of the guys that I was in the service with over there got back, and then we had a reunion in San Diego the next year, the 50th anniversary of Okinawa, the Sixth Marine Division did, and then we got back over there and chatted with them, and our old company commander was over there. But we kept pretty close-knit. There was about 175 of us in our tank company, and we have good addresses on about 30 of us is left in there, and this last spring we got together, it was 22 of us got together down in St. Louis. So we keep pretty close tabs on each other.

Mark: Sounds like it.

Botts: Next week we want to get together and have dinner with one in Springfield, Illinois.

Mark: They're out in the Midwest here, all over the country?

Botts: Well, no, they're all over the country. One guy's from Washington, there's three of them from California, two of them from up in the Dakotas, and three from Minnesota, two from Florida, two from Missouri, and one from Arkansas, and I'm the only one from Wisconsin, I guess. There was

three of us. Two of them are dead already. So we get together and we talk to each other on the telephone and stuff. There's another book that I just got that was written in '95, and it is just on the Okinawa campaign there and how that thing was put together and completed, and along with that book I got another one that was written by the Japanese commanding officer of that same operation. That was interesting to read them both. Have you seen those?

Mark: I'll show you the books we have. I haven't seen one by a Japanese officer in there. We have a couple books on the campaign, doing some of the Okinawa campaign [both talking at once].

Botts: Then I got a little video too I picked up one time. The one on Okinawa, I think the name of it is "The Killing Ground," and it's on Sugarloaf Hill basically, but it goes ahead and completes the whole operation.

Mark: [Inaudible] Well, thanks for coming in. I appreciate it.

Botts: I appreciate it.

Mark: Very interesting.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]