

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
AL EICKELBERG
Rifleman, Marine Corps, World War II.

2004

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Eickelberg, Aloysius B., (1920-2007). Oral History Interview, 2004.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 50 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 50 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Aloysius “Al” B. Eickelberg, a Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin native, discusses his service in the 1st Marine Regiment, 3rd Battalion, Company L, 1st Platoon during World War II, focusing on his experiences during the Battle of Okinawa. Eickelberg talks about enlisting in the Marine Corps after graduating from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He discusses boot camp in San Diego, infantry training at Camp Pendleton (California), and the ship ride to Pavuvu (Solomon Islands), where he was stationed for a year. Eickelberg details his participation in the invasion of Okinawa. He talks about spending the night as part of the reserve force in a Higgins boat, watching kamikaze attacks from the boat, and advancing to Yontan Airfield after landing. Eickelberg speaks of taking cover from a low-flying Japanese airplane and witnessing the capture of a crash-landed Japanese pilot. As the scout for a four-man rifle team, he talks about moving through a destroyed town, seeing two of his men killed by machine gun fire, helping a tank clear out the machine gun, and carrying the dead back to the rear. He recalls a wounded man who was pinned in the field of fire and calling for help and seeing a corpsman get shot trying to help him. Eickelberg comments on the number of mines cleared out of the area he had been operating in, uncovering a barrel trap, and being wounded in the temple by shrapnel. He states his unit’s last corpsman was killed after bandaging Eickelberg’s head. After getting a blood transfusion at the aid station, he touches on having surgery at an Army hospital, being moved to Pearl Harbor via Guam, and visiting the crowded bars in Honolulu. After returning to California, he talks about his homecoming, going home on leave with his wife, the poor conditions of the train ride, and having a second operation on his head injury. Eickelberg touches on attending college, his civilian career as a crane salesman, and joining the Disabled American Veterans.

Biographical Sketch:

Eickelberg (1920-2007) served in the Marine Corps from 1944 to 1945 and was honorably discharged at the rank of corporal. He spent twenty-six years selling overhead cranes for Harnischfeger Corp. in Chicago and Indiana, and, after retiring, he settled in Sturgeon Bay (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by Terry MacDonald, 2004

Transcribed by Telise Johnsen, 2011

Edited by Joan Bruggink, 2012

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2012

Interview Transcript:

Terry: —Al Eickelberg, who served with the United States Marines, 1st Division, 1st Regiment, 3rd Battalion, Company L, 1st Platoon, during World War II in Okinawa. This interview is being conducted at Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, at the following address: Whispering Pines #1, 1610 Georgia Street, Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, on the following date: August 21, 2004, and the interviewer is Terry MacDonald.

Okay, Al, could you just briefly give us a background of where you were born and a little history of yourself?

A.E.: Yes. I was born in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, and I lived here for about thirty years. And then I went into the—I felt like I wanted to go into the Marine Corps so I put myself up for voluntary induction and joined the group. I went down to Milwaukee and the first thing I know, I was in the Marines.

Terry: Who were some of the other fellows who went down with you?

A.E.: Stan Kramer[?] was one of the guys. Orson Nay[?] was another. That's all I recall at the moment. Stan Kramer and Orson were gonna join the Marines with me but they saw the big, gruff Marine representative there and when he asked, "Who's going to join the Marines?" they turned around and moved over to the Navy line. And a good thing they did. They probably would have been killed.

Terry: Before you went down, had you graduated from high school at that time? And what year was that?

A.E.: Yes, I had graduated from college. I went to University of Wisconsin-Madison, took mechanical engineering, and graduated from there. Then I went to work for Harnischfeger Corporation for—oh, I can't recall the dates, but my job was selling overhead cranes and I spent twenty-six years in Chicago covering the east South Side of Chicago and northern state of Indiana. I can't recollect now.

Terry: Then when you went into the Marines, did you go in in Milwaukee?

A.E.: Yes.

Terry: Milwaukee. And where did you go to boot camp?

A.E.: Down in San Diego I was in boot camp. Then we went into Camp Pendleton after that and were there about six or eight months, then I was put into the 1st Division.

Terry: What was it like as a young man when you went through boot camp? Can you describe some of the things you went through?

A.E.: It was an awful shock. [laughs] But it really straightened you out and learned you discipline. And then we had our rifle testing about the end of boot camp. That's whether you qualified for rifleman or expert or what. I was fortunate enough to qualify for expert rifle. Then we were put into our platoons and our group that we were with for the rest of the training period at Camp Pendleton.

Terry: Was that some sort of Advanced Infantry Training?

A.E.: It was infantry training for learning discipline and for conditioning. We'd go out for a march every day, and I don't know what else.

Terry: Were they training you at that time to go into the jungle warfare or the islands? Is that what you were training specifically for?

A.E.: Yes, very definitely. We went from there to a little island called Pavuvu. That's not far from Guadalcanal. I was there about a year and then they formed plans for our getting aboard ship and going to Okinawa.

Terry: Can you briefly describe what it was like on the shipboard going across the ocean?

A.E.: It was an awful lot of people, an awful lot of Marines there, and just barely space for the bunks and the comfort of the Marine.

Terry: What was the food like on board ship?

A.E.: The food wasn't bad, as long as we were eating with the crew and all. But then shortly before we got aboard ship we had heard, the scoop was that we were going to be landing in Okinawa and we got into the Higgins boats and climbed down the ropes. We had to be careful, though, to step into the boat when the wave was bringing it up, because that could cause you to have a bad—break your ankles or your legs.

But anyway, we all got aboard the Higgins boats and we started for shore. And we got about a hundred feet offshore—oh, let's just say a hundred yards, and we ran across a coral reef and we couldn't go any further. So we tied all the boats together and stayed there for the night.

Terry: You were the first wave of Marines to go in ashore?

A.E.: No, actually we were in reserve. That's why we were in the boats so late. And then we had to tie the boats together and just waited there for daylight and for the tanks to come out and pick us up and bring us in to the shore. So when it got daylight—of course we sat there all night and had a rogue's view of all the kamikaze and the ships' air fire or anti-aircraft.

Terry: What were your thoughts while you were waiting there and seeing all this firing? What were you thinking about?

A.E.: It was pretty scary. Very worried about if the kamikaze had sighted our boats all tied together that would have been a prime target and that would have been the end. But we made it 'til morning, and then the amphibious tanks came out and brought us in over the coral reef and we landed on shore.

When we got on shore, I don't know where the word came from, but it came down the line that we should dispose of our gas masks. So we threw all the gas masks on the shore and then proceeded across the island. And where we landed we didn't have any opposition whatsoever. We just went right across Yontan Airport and to the other shore. That would be the west shore.

And over on the west shore we set up—we came back there was a rumor that the Japs were going to try to recover the airport, so we dug foxholes in that particular area along the airway strip and stayed there for a few days and started to get pretty comfortable, until one day we saw a Zero over the airport. And then a P-38 went up to challenge them.

And we were hollering and cheering for the P-38, for the U.S. guy, and then all of a sudden the Marine right next to me fell to the ground. We checked him, and here he'd received two stray bullets right at the base of his neck and he was dead. Then we moved out of there, didn't see any more of the dogfight. Moved out of there to—we went to the east side of the island then. On the way we came across a little, like a dry creek bed and we were going to have a little rest there. We just took off our packs and rested until all of a sudden there was a Zero coming right toward us. We thought sure that we were gonna be strafed, but the Zero just skimmed the top and went right over us and didn't pay any attention to us. But he landed about, oh, forty or fifty feet beyond us, right into the brush.

And our guys got over there and pulled him out of the plane. They started beating on him with rifle butts and so on until somebody in authority came over there and stopped 'em, took the Jap prisoner. And then our men took him over to our headquarters, apparently for interrogation. And it was kind of remarkable, because it isn't often that an infantry unit captures a Jap airplane or the pilot.

Terry: Did he crash? He just crashed nearby there?

A.E.: He just crash landed. It was very little damage to the plane at all.

Terry: Were you guys shooting at him when he came in?

A.E.: No, we were trying to take cover; we tried to get out of the way because we thought we were going to get strafed. But then we got out of there with the Jap prisoner and the fella in authority took him over to be interrogated. So that's the last that we saw of him.

I can't recall—what did we have? I got to think a little bit. Let's see—.

Terry: While you were on the island there, earlier you said you were digging foxholes for protection and stuff. What was the terrain like? Was it real sandy?

A.E.: We were right on the beach. The ground was sandy and easy to dig a foxhole in. But we moved out from there, then we were going across the island, like I said, sort of checking out for security.

The next move was we were assigned to go through a little town. It was just all bombed and all rubble. And we, being the first fire team, went through the place first. And we went down a road, rubble on both sides, and we walked right into a machine gun. And he machine-gunned, of course, attacked us.

And the riflemen—I was the scout. There are four guys in a rifle team: one is the leader, one is the BAR [Browning automatic rifle] man, another BAR man assistant, and I was the scout.

When the machine gun opened up on us, immediately our BAR man and our assistant BAR man were killed. They laid right in the middle of the road. The fire team leader, his name was Berger[?], he fell into the little ravine alongside of the road and they weren't able to shoot him because they couldn't see him.

And I somehow stepped behind a stone wall and got out of the machine-gun fire. I could hear the bullets bouncing off the rocks right ahead of me. And then when the, uh, the bullets hit the mortar, there was a big puff of smoke. So that told me that the mortar didn't stop the bullets. The bullets were going through, and I'd better get out of there. But there was no place to go until we heard a tank coming down the road. There was a fellow back of the tank on the telephone. The fellow was guiding the tank into the position where they could clear out the machine gun. And he did maneuver the tank into the spot, but in doing so he run over the bodies of those two fellows that were definitely killed.

And when I got that support I was able to jump out behind the tank and the fellow that was guiding the tank and I brought the tank into position where they would be pointing their 75mm gun directly at the machine gun. And they fired two shots. I didn't see anything, but that must have cleared the machine gun, cleared the Japs away from the front of the tank and so we were free to move around then.

But then we had to pick up our dead and our wounded to take 'em back to the rear. And that was a difficult task, because they were [*clears throat*], they were quite big people and it was quite a load on the stretchers. But we brought them back to meet these tanks that were coming up to pick up our dead and our wounded.

The next day we were organized for another move. We stayed overnight there and we—I forget how we did that. There wasn't much more action that particular night but then the next morning we were assigned to go up and take the next ridge.

And, uh, oh, when we were hauling back, we loaded the dead and we came across a pothole where there was a guy hollering for help. He said he'd been shot in the waist and he couldn't move. Anybody that moved, that went out toward him, was in the open and they couldn't get to him without getting killed. In spite of that, a corpsman jumped up and went out to him. He was just bending over the wounded guy and there were two bullets that were fired and the corpsman apparently was killed and dropped on top of the wounded guy. [*clears throat*]

Oh, the next morning, the bomb squad came through and they were clearing out the area. And it turned out that they got about a hundred mines out of the about a hundred-yard-square field that we had come over that day. It was just fortunate that we didn't hit one of them.

But then we—I don't recall—we traveled north again after that and we run into more stuff. I recall we formed a skirmish line and went towards the next ridge. And, uh, just walking along in this skirmish line, I stepped right on—apparently on the edge of the cover of a barrel. What the Japs were doing was they'd dig a hole the size and shape of a barrel and they'd crawl in. And when you go by, then they could shoot you in the back. But anyway, the guy following me found I moved the top of the barrel enough with my foot that he recognized it so he flipped the head off of the barrel and flipped it over and fired three thirty-ought-six shells to eliminate that hazard.

So, uh, I can't remember the sequence of the next [*clears throat*]*—oh, we moved up to the next ridge and we were supposed to, there was another Marine, myself and another Marine, it was Jacobs, I remember that name.*

Again, we were going to protect the machine gun when, uh— [pause] [*coughing in background*]. Evidently the spot was covered completely by their arterial men[?]. And it was just one mortar blast that landed right alongside the machine gun and a small fragment hit me right above my left ear. It severed an artery in the left temporal region and I was bleeding profusely. They called the corpsman and the corpsman came over and wrapped it as tight as he could. Then shortly after he left the bandage became loosened and there was bleeding again.

Terry: Were you conscious all the time, Al?

A.E.: Oh, yes. And, uh, I left my foxhole. Oh, and Jacobs, I saw him running along the ridge looking for the mortar crew but he never found them. I started bleeding very profusely again so I walked over towards the direction that I saw the corpsman leave. And I asked, “Where’s the corpsman? Where’s Harris?” And they said that when he left my foxhole a mortar had dropped right on his head. And he was our last corpsman.

The tanks were coming up to take us off the line, that is, for the wounded, anyway. I remember the first place we stopped, I had a blood transfusion. That got me to the next station.

Terry: When you were at the aid station, were there a lot of corpsmen there? Can you kind of describe what the aid station was?

A.E.: There was just a tank and about, maybe, three or four corpsmen. Then I got another transfusion. By that time I must have been pretty much out of the blood. When I received that transfusion, it was like, uh, like about an eight-hour sleep then. They told me that the blood was donated by a lady, very Italian accented, a lady from Chicago. Maybe that’s why I have an urge for spaghetti now.

So then they took me back to the—there was an Army hospital and, fortunately, a neurosurgeon by the name of Dr. Barowski[?]. Then he checked me over and decided to do surgery right away. So he [*clears throat*] took a piece of skull out of my left temporal region. It was about the size and the shape of an egg. See?

Terry: Where were you at this time? Were you still on the island, or were you—

A.E.: Yeah. When I got hit by the small shrapnel, we were still, of course, still on the island.—[**End of Tape 1, Side A**] —And I wanted to comment on the Navy corpsmen. They were with the Marines. They did a wonderful job, and we got—[**Tape Pause**]

Terry: —the corpsmen?

A.E.: Yeah. Any corpsmen or Marines that are familiar with any of these events, I'd surely like to get in touch with them. My personal thanks for the help of the Navy corpsmen.

Terry: Where did you go when you left the island? You were wounded, and where did they ship you then?

A.E.: I was in the Army hospital for about a week; that was after my operation. And then I was starting to recover fairly well and I could walk with a little help. Then they put me on a plane and they flew me all the way to Guam. Then I was at Guam for about another week or so. Then they flew me to Pearl Harbor and then I was at Pearl Harbor; that was the end of the tour then.

I was able to get around. In fact, there were two or three of us that went through a hole in the fence around the hospital and went down to Honolulu. And it was just a crowded mess. It was really hardly any fun. And you'd go to a bar and we were allowed two drinks, then you had to move on to the next bar. Just loaded with servicemen. I got a rather bad taste in my mouth for Honolulu. It was all that military. [*clears throat*] I had no desire or urge to go back. That's pretty much it.

Terry: Did they treat you pretty good at the Navy hospital? Can you describe your experiences there?

A.E.: It was an Army field hospital. Actually, all the surgery cases, we were laying in Army cots right on the ground. And there were probably about, oh, forty or fifty guys on the cots, in the room—or in the tent, I should say—and some of them in pretty bad shape.

It was ironic to see that the Army medics were really concerned about the head wounds and the head operations. See 'em come through every morning and pick up the guys that had cold feet and put them to the end of the tent and then get the fellows over to take them off to wherever.

Terry: Where did you go after you left Honolulu?

A.E.: Then we went back to Pendleton. We had to wait 'til we had gotten well enough to take the flight home. We were supposed to be, oh, stretcher cases to qualify for a flight. But we'd get onto the stretcher, they'd put us on the plane, and then we'd walk around after we got on the plane, then we got up to do our thing. We were assigned a bunk and just kind of passed our time until it was our turn to catch the plane to go to whatever area they were sending us to. I stayed there for, oh, about a month.

Terry: And where was that at, now?

A.E.: That was at San Diego. Oh, no, it was at Oak Knoll[?] Hospital. And, well then I was given a thirty-day leave and a thirty-day extension. And I went back home. It was a miserable trip. The train was loaded with soldiers, Marines, and naturally there weren't any such things as a Pullman, the sleeping coach. We all just laid right in the seats. And unfortunately, we had—my wife and I had a seat right at the rear of the train, of the car, and it was a straight back, no leading partition or curved seats.

Terry: You mentioned your wife. Was she at California with you?

A.E.: She was out there, yes, at the time that I was—she was living with her folks, at her parents', after I came back overseas. Then I had to return. Like I say, it was a thirty-day leave and the thirty-day extension. And I was confused on my length of extension, because it was a thirty-one day. And so I was a day late in my leave, but they overlooked that.

Terry: Did you come back to Sturgeon Bay on your leave?

A.E.: I came back to Sturgeon Bay area, yes. And visited, enjoyed seeing my relatives, and so on. Then I went back for the second operation on my head. Both times these operations were strictly local. I mean, they didn't use any anesthesia for brain surgery. I don't know the reason why, but it was all strictly local anesthesia around the area of the wound. [*clears throat*]

What they did is, they had a tantalum plate that they fitted just over the size of the hole and, like I say, the hole was about the size and shape of an egg. And the shrapnel was still on the inside of the skull. And I went around that way for, of course, all the time that I was home on leave. When I'd tilt my head to the left side, there would be a big lump where it come out of my skull, and then if I turned to the other side, there'd be a bulge. But I had to try to keep that protected when I was on leave. I guess that's about it.

Terry: Did you get a medical discharge, then, from the Marine Corps?

A.E.: Yes.

Terry: And what year was that, Al?

A.E.: Here. [*rustling papers*]

Terry: Yeah, you're referring to an honorable discharge from the United States Marine Corps as a corporal.

A.E.: Yeah.

Terry: 194—

A.E.: 1945.

Terry: November of 1945 you were discharged.

A.E.: Yeah.

Terry: Did you return to Sturgeon Bay after that?

A.E.: Yes, I came to Sturgeon Bay and I got lined up for mechanical engineering for the next four years. See, I got the forty-eight months program. Is that right? That was six—four years, four—well, yeah, but anyways, four years, four months, the whole period anyway. Then I graduated in mechanical engineering.

Terry: And that was from what school?

A.E.: This was the University of Wisconsin. And immediately after that I went to work for Harnischfeger as a salesman selling heavy equipment, namely overhead cranes. And my territory was, like I say, east Chicago, northeast part of Illinois, and the north part of Indiana. So, uh, oh, when I got back out of the schooling and then back to Sturgeon Bay, I'd have been gone, then, forty years. And thought I'd probably just pick up and renew acquaintances, but that's not the case. You got to get reacquainted all over again.

Terry: What was the year you did go into the Marine Corps? What year did you go into the Marine Corps, Al? You remember what year it was?

A.E.: Must have been 1944.

Terry: Okay. Now, when you got out, did you use your G.I. benefits to go to school, or not?

A.E.: Oh, yeah. It was the Veterans Administration. I got a disability, plus a pension, and it was adequate to support me, keep me in school and to live on. And besides that my wife was working. She was doing secretarial work, working in the, usually the Red Cross as a Red Cross secretary.

Terry: What year did you retire and move back to Sturgeon Bay? Do you recall?

A.E.: When I was discharged, November '4-, I think it was November 11th—no, that's different—November 1945.

Terry: When you were in the Marine Corps, did you make any real friendships with any other Marines and keep in contact with them over the years?

A.E.: No, I haven't.

Terry: Did you join any veterans' organizations when you came back?

A.E.: Oh, yeah. I joined the DAV, the disabled veterans, and the—well, actually, that's the only one. Yeah.

Terry: Well, looking back, what did you feel about the time of your life you spent in the military and fighting the war?

A.E.: What was that?

Terry: How do feel about serving in the military and fighting in the war, World War II?

A.E.: War is hell. If you can avoid it, certainly—the question is protecting your country. But people in this country, the United States, don't know what war is until they have it in their own neighborhood.

Terry: What did serving in the military mean in your life, as far as the rest of your life after the military? Did it have a big impact on you?

A.E.: Oh, yes, definitely. [*clears throat*] After I was discharged, military discharge, I really didn't think much about World War II. Then subsequently when I had open-heart surgery and a stroke, it made me quite disabled. I was in a—what do you call it? —a partial nursing hospital. That's what this place is here. It's quite an adequate facility. It's not a nursing home. It's a—what do you call it?—I guess a partially disabled nursing home.

Terry: Well, Al, do you have any other comments you'd like to make as regarding your World War II service or your contributions to the fighting overseas?

A.E.: No, not that I can recollect now.

[End of Interview]