

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
RUSS A. KOHLOFF
Paratrooper and Rifleman, Marine Corps, World War II.

2000

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Kohloff, Russ A., (1922-). Oral History Interview, 2000.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 45 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 45 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 45 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Russ A. Kohloff, a Wauwatosa, Wisconsin native, discusses his Marine Corps service during World War II in the Pacific Theater. Kohloff mentions enlisting and going to San Diego for boot camp, and he describes having additional training in New Zealand. He talks about doing one jump during training as a Marine paratrooper with the 2nd Marine Battalion, 1st Marine Parachute Regiment on New Caledonia. After passing through Guadalcanal, he talks about his first combat experience on Vella Lavella (Solomon Islands) and riding in Jack Kennedy's fleet of PT boats. Kohloff touches on fighting on Choiseul and Bougainville before the Marine Paratroopers were disbanded and sent back to the States. Assigned to the 27th Regiment of the new 5th Marine Division, he details participating in the invasion of Iwo Jima: having to swim after his Higgins boat was hit, getting ashore without any gear, scavenging equipment and weapons from dead Marines, and being pinned on the beach by enemy fire the first day and night. Kohloff states the saddest thing was being unable to prevent the dead from being washed away when the tide came in. He recalls there were also humorous moments, such as when he tried to take a helmet from a seemingly dead Marine, who proceeded to curse him out. Kohloff recalls leaving his shell hole when a captain commandeered it and being grateful he had moved an hour later when the hole suffered a direct hit. He comments on the volcanic ash cushioning mortar hits, use of flamethrowers, and the difficulty of locating Japanese-occupied caves. Kohloff characterizes "Lucky," a Marine whom he saw get hit in the forehead but who survived that and two other major injuries. Around the fifth day, Kohloff discusses the difficulty of recovering casualties to and getting supplies from ships due to debris on the beach. He recalls the ferocity with which the Japanese attacked tanks and being unable to take many Japanese prisoners. After Iwo Jima was secured, he talks about preparing for the invasion of mainland Japan and, after the war ended, going to Sasebo as an occupation force. Kohloff describes confiscating large shore guns, having a Japanese boat pilot navigate through the mined harbor, seeing the destruction at Nagasaki, and being treated well by the Japanese civilians. He recalls finally catching a ship home after three months. Kohloff mentions having jungle rot, dysentery, and recurring attacks of malaria resulting in weight loss, which alarmed his mother when he was home on furlough. He talks about arguing with Woods VA Hospital (Milwaukee) about long-term leg problems, his civilian career as a salesman, and joining the VFW and Marine Corps League. Kohloff speaks of attending a gathering in Washington, D.C. for the fifty-fifth anniversary of the invasion of Iwo Jima and visiting the Iwo Jima memorial. He comments on not having enough corpsmen on Iwo Jima, getting a wound treated after landing, and the policy of not leaving behind dead or wounded. He explains

the Japanese would use wounded Marines to lure other Marines into their line of fire. Kohloff touches on mail delivery on Iwo Jima, listening to Tokyo Rose, and, while in Japan, meeting an eighty-year-old American Marine who had retired to Japan with his Japanese wife and sat out the war there.

Biographical Sketch:

Kohloff (b.1922) served in the Marine Corps from 1942 to 1945. He eventually settled in Beloit (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2000
Transcribed by Alison Carriere, 2012
Edited by Joan Bruggink, 2012
Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2012

Interview Transcript:

James: Okay, we are talking to Russ Kohloff, 23 March, year 2000. Where were you born, Russ?

Russ: Wauwatosa, Wisconsin.

James: In what year?

Russ: 5-7-22 is my birthday.

James: 5-22, okay. And what year did you enter military service?

Russ: '42.

James: And where did you go first?

Russ: San Diego, boot camp.

James: You enlisted?

Russ: Yes.

James: You were at San Diego for boot camp, and then where?

Russ: Well, we came out of there and we had our basic training and from there I went over to New Zealand.

James: Right away?

Russ: Yeah, I mean in October of '42.

James: What was your rating then?

Russ: Private.

James: Private, yeah. I mean what was your specialty? I mean, were you a rifleman or did you—

Russ: Yeah, rifleman.

James: In New Zealand. I don't think I ever had anyone go directly to New Zealand. What did you do there?

Russ: It was a wonder spot of the world.

James: Tell me about New Zealand.

Russ: We got there in October of '42 and it was more training, you know, getting ready. I was 2nd Marine Division, and the 1st Marine Division was up in Guadalcanal and we were going to be in support of them.

James: You were scheduled to go to Guadalcanal?

Russ: Yeah, we were in support of them, but then they didn't—we never did get there until later on. In fact, when we got to Guadalcanal it was over with.

James: Tell me about New Zealand. How long were you there?

Russ: New Zealand, I wasn't there long enough. [laughs] From October to Christmas of that year, of '42.

James: How was your training different there than it had been at home?

Russ: Not much different there, you know.

James: They didn't have more jungle-type—

Russ: No, they didn't have too much jungle, just like they didn't have in the States, you know. But then from there we went to New Caledonia, where there was—

James: Then you went to New Caledonia from New Zealand?

Russ: Right, yeah. Uh-huh [affirmative].

James: And what happened in New Caledonia?

Russ: New Caledonia. Once again we were laying around waiting to be called and I was in the Paratroopers then.

James: Oh, still a Marine, though?

Russ: Yeah, I was still a Marine. I went into Marine Paratroopers, yeah.

James: And what was that outfit called?

Russ: It was called 2nd Marine Battalion, Parachute Battalion of the 1st Marine Regiment, Parachute Regiment.

James: 2nd Marine Battalion, Marine Parachute Battalion. So now you had to have some jump training.

Russ: Yeah, I started to go over there and then I only made one jump. I didn't go through in the States. I started to go through there, but then they moved us and we went up to New Caledonia and then they stopped the school and we went up to the Canal. That was in, uh—

James: Canal?

Russ: Guadalcanal. That was in '43, Christmas of '43. Christmas of '42 we left Caledonia and went up to the Canal.

James: And had you completed your parachute training?

Russ: No, I just made one jump, that's all.

James: Just made one jump. So you were back to being a rifleman?

Russ: Well, I was still in the Paratroops. Then from Guadalcanal we went up to Vella Lavella. An island called Vella Lavella.

James: With a "v"?

Russ: V-E-L-L-A, Vella Lavella.

James: I don't ever recall—

Russ: That's up the Strait of the Solomons, up to Bougainville.

James: I see. Okay. Did you encounter some combat there?

Russ: Yeah. Yeah, not too much. Not too much at all.

James: But that was your first experience?

Russ: That was the first experience in combat, yeah.

James: Shooting your gun?

Russ: Right, yeah. [laughs] First time I was, uh, first patrol I went on meeting the enemy. And we got lost that first patrol. [laughs]

James: Terrific, just what you planned?

Russ: Yeah, caught hell for that, yeah. Yeah. And then from there we made a landing on Choiseul. I can't even remember how you spell that: C-H-O-I—

James: C-H-O-I-S?

Russ: E-U-L, yeah. Choiseul. And then from there we went up to Bougainville. Also in Vella Lavella we were stationed with Kennedy's PT boats.

James: Oh, he had a base there?

Russ: He had a base there in the northern part of the island and they were always looking around for guys to ride along for fire power. They would hit all these little islands and they would take us along on them. I never met Jack, I didn't know who he was at that time, but—

James: But you rode in his—

Russ: Yeah, we rode in his fleet, yeah, his fleet there.

James: Not on his boat, though?

Russ: I wouldn't really know if it was or not.

James: That's right, they all look alike, right?

Russ: Yeah, they all look alike; so did all them Navy guys. [laughs]

James: What did they have you do on that PT boat? Just having fun?

Russ: Yeah, just having fun, going along the islands and fire power and that, you know.

James: Those used to be night raids.

Russ: Yeah, all night. All-night raids. Oh yeah, they were fun.

James: People on the coast and—

Russ: Yeah, them really went. They really was fun.

James: That must have been exciting.

Russ: Yeah, that was. Because as far as Vella Lavella, there wasn't a lot of fighting there, very little. The only time we got hit was when we landed. We landed on an LST. In fact, we went from Guadalcanal at that time, uh, that's what they called a slot. That where your big Naval and Japan battles were. We went from Guadalcanal up to Vella Lavella in a LST, which is a top speed of about six knots, all by ourselves, no convoy. So then after Bougainville, then they took us—

James: Were you on the trenches in Bougainville, on the line?

Russ: Yeah. Uh-huh [agreement].

James: How long was that?

Russ: I can't remember. I think just a month or so, it seems to me. It didn't—

James: Was the fighting intense where you were?

Russ: Not as much, no, uh-uh [disagreement].

James: They were widening out?

Russ: Yeah, it was uh, it uh—God, a friend of mine, Jim McKern[?], he was in the 3rd Marine Division and he used to always kid us that the Paratroops always fired on them, that's the only ones they fired at. Instead of the Japs they fired on them. He was one of the starters of this Marine Corps League here. He passed away here about a year ago. So him and I had a lot of good stories to tell. Then from there we went back to Vella Lavella and then back to the Guadalcanal and then they decided that they didn't need the Marine Paratroopers or the Marine Raiders anymore, so they disbanded us and sent us back to the States.

James: Back to the States?

Russ: Yeah, back to the States. And there they formed a 5th Marine Division.

James: Then you switched to the 5th Marine Division?

Russ: 5th Marine Division, right. They were just forming that then.

James: 5th Division, okay. Do you recall what month and what year that was?

Russ: I think not.

James: Early in '45, I suppose?

Russ: No, '44.

James: Still in '44?

Russ: '44, because in '44 we went back overseas again and got ready for Iwo.

James: So that's where you headed after you left the United States?

Russ: Yeah, went to Hawaii, and then Iwo, yeah.

James: Alright, so you made the landing on Iwo Jima?

Russ: Right. Uh-huh. [agreement]

James: With the 5th Marines?

Russ: 5th Marine Division, right.

James: One of my high school classmates, lives in Michigan now, Roger Greilly[?] made that landing.

Russ: Oh yeah. But you don't know what outfit he was in?

James: I don't know. I know it was 5th Division, but I don't know what regiment. But anyway, he said he felt lucky to survive that.

Russ: And how.

James: Tell me about that landing now. There's been so much talk about how difficult it was getting up on that sand.

Russ: It was, yeah.

James: You couldn't get a foothold.

Russ: Couldn't get a foothold, you couldn't dig a foxhole or, uh, you just crawled everywhere you went, you crawled.

James: Was it pretty steep?

Russ: Yeah, I would say, uh—

James: From the water's edge?

Russ: Yeah, it was almost twice as high as this. I'd say about ten, twenty feet in most places there, yeah.

James: That's a pretty sharp angle then.

Russ: Oh yeah, yeah. You just, it was just all, just sand, that's all there was, just real soft sand, yeah. If you ever seen the silicone sand, that exactly what it was like. And, uh, we were supposed to—for us it was only going to be—I was in the ninth wave and I got hit, we got hit going in and I hadda swim in.

We didn't take a direct hit, it just took our boat, Higgins boat, and dumped it right upside down and we had to swim in then.

James: You lost a lot of equipment then?

Russ: Everything, yeah.

James: All you had was your rifle?

Russ: Oh no, didn't even have that. We had nothing, had bandoliers of ammo, had to take off, 'cause I sunk—

James: Oh, because you would have drowned?

Russ: I sunk [laughing]; I sunk like a rock. Thank God I could swim.

James: That's right. Boy, all of a sudden it became very important, didn't it?

Russ: Yeah, it sure did, and then, uh—

James: Lot of guys couldn't make that?

Russ: No, most of the guys that were on that boat with me got in, yeah, they did. The only thing was, we didn't land where we were supposed to land, right on the bottom of Mount Suribachi, and of course we had—all of that time you're so—you're really not scared, you're just confused, you know, because of course they're firing at us coming in, machine guns and mortars and, uh, large artillery and—

James: And you had nothing?

Russ: No. Well, it didn't do you any good have nothing because you couldn't see them anyhow. That was the difference between jungle fighting and Iwo; there was no place to hide. And, uh, they had us covered on—here was Mount Suribachi here, and then of course the northern part of the island there, and they had us zeroed in real good. And uh, but our, uh, our outfit was supposed to get to the first airstrip, take that and be back, and we were supposed to be off the island in seventy-two hours. We never got to the first airstrip. [laughs]

James: I was going to say, that didn't work out at all.

Russ: No, [laughs] no. I read a lot of stories on it now and that there are different conflicting things they had and how they wanted more bombing and more shelling and—

James: Would it have made a difference?

Russ: I don't think so. No, they were in so deep that—

James: The Japanese had such an advantage, didn't they?

Russ: Oh yeah.

James: They had everything. They had the terrain, they had the elevation.

Russ: Everything. And they were underground. One guy swore he was laying in his foxhole and he swore he got hit in the stomach; he said guy poked a rifle into him. [laughs]

James: [laughs] Oh, that's funny.

Russ: Of course when I got in I had no equipment, nothing. I didn't have no shoes or nothing.

James: Shoes?

Russ: No shoes, just the clothes I had on, you know, and wringing wet and so there's dead guys laying all over the place on the beach and—

James: You picked up some of the shoes from them?

Russ: Yeah, shoes and rifles. The first guy I went to, he had a—laying there like this, you know, with his rifle and he looked like he was dead and I started takin' off his helmet, because the first thing I wanted was a helmet, and he looked at me and he said, "What in the fuck are you doing?" [laughs] I said, "Oh, I thought you were dead!" [laughs] And he said, "Well, you can see I'm not, you asshole."

James: "I'll find another one."

Russ: Yeah, I found another one.

James: So you picked up a helmet and boots and a rifle?

Russ: Yeah, then I got the rifle, yeah, and the gas mask and uh, of course I had no pack or anything like that, but there were so many laying around that it was no trouble.

James: What was in the pack that you could have used?

Russ: Your shelter half, and clean clothing, socks and t-shirts. Not that you had a chance to change then, but I mean—

- James: How long were you pinned down, Russ?
- Russ: We were pinned down that first, uh, that first night, all day and all night we were pinned down. We couldn't get over there. There was no place to go and the beach was so crowded that uh, uh, boats couldn't get in anymore to bring supplies in.
- James: It was live and dead?
- Russ: Live and dead, all over, and of course they set up the aid stations right on the beach; there was no place to, uh, have them, you know. And at night the tide came in and washed these poor guys out. That was the saddest thing, you know. You tried to grab them but you couldn't.
- James: Too many.
- Russ: Yeah, there was too many.
- James: Amtrak [amphibious tractor] try to get up that beach?
- Russ: Yeah, the Amtraks did. Nothing, and then finally they got, uh, they brought in these steel ramps in a couple days, a day or two later.
- James: That solved the problem?
- Russ: Yeah. And then the tanks came in and artillery came. Because at first we had no artillery, no nothing and there are just the riflemen, you know.
- James: What about those destroyers and ships?
- Russ: Oh, they pounded, they pounded. They pulled right up. One of them was—a little destroyer pulled up on the beach like a rowboat, hitting point blank into Mount Suribachi, and three days it still took 'em to take that, yeah.
- James: Well I suppose there must have been a point where you decided this isn't going to work.
- Russ: [laughs] That was the day I landed. I said, "This ain't going to work. What in the hell are we doing here?" [laughs]
- James: Who made this decision?
- Russ: Yeah, "Who made this decision?" Yeah, yeah. It was real sad, but there was a lot of humorous things and then—like that first, I finally found my sergeant and he had a big shell-hole that he was in, him and three other guys, and so

we got in that and about an hour later some captain came in with a radio crew and said, "We need this hole." Sergeant said, "Like hell you're going to get it." He said, "Sergeant, I'm a captain," he said, "we need this hole." So we had to move out and they took a direct hit about an hour later and there was nothing left of them. So we were lucky there.

James: Wow. So that went against the old rule that if you go into one bomb-hole they'll never hit that same place again.

Russ: Yeah, right, yeah.

James: But that's not so.

Russ: That's not so, no. No.

James: Mainly was mortar fire used more than machine gun or about the same?

Russ: Oh, yeah, mortar. Mortar, and their artillery was the worst. There was no protection against it.

James: Even though you couldn't see them, it didn't make any difference.

Russ: Yeah, you could hear them though, you know. The only thing I think that saved a lot of us was the soft volcanic ash. The mortar when it hit it went in a little bit, and of course—

James: And it didn't spread as much?

Russ: It don't spread as much. I think that saved a lot, a lot of guys. Yeah. So actually we were safer on the beach. If you had to be on the beach or over the wall it was because over the wall it was harder ground, you know. But machine guns, and they had machine guns, everything there, and this John Basilone, I don't know if you've ever heard of him, he was the first man to win the Congressional Medal of Honor in World War Two. He was killed on Iwo.

James: He was the first Marine to—

Russ: Win a Congressional Medal of Honor, yeah. He won it on Guadalcanal. And he was killed. He was in my outfit, and him and our colonel was wounded that same night, that same day. And he went over the wall, or over the hill, and ran into a machine gun nest. And flamethrowers was a big thing, getting the Japs out.

James: It took you a while to get those to shore, though.

- Russ: Well, I'm talking about the hand flamethrower. Yeah.
- James: But still, you had to get fairly close to use those?
- Russ: Oh yeah, you had to, oh yeah.
- James: So there was a problem there?
- Russ: Yeah. I can tell you a little story now about that. I went to this Iwo Jima reunion, that's the fifty-fifth reunion in Washington D.C. I was sitting there talkin' to a guy and I had my little adopted grandson with me and he kind of took a liking to him and was talking to him and finally, after about the third day, he said—well anyhow, in this book I told a story, this one flamethrower came up to hit a cave, up a hill, and we were covering him, there was about five of us covering him. And just as he pulled the trigger to spray into this cave he got hit right in the head. His helmet flew off and he went ass over backwards and the flamethrower is on and he sprayed the guy behind him that was covering him. So anyhow, I didn't help pick him up, this other guy that ran up covered him with, uh, sand and whatever they could find, but it was too late. But anyhow, this guy, I picked up his helmet and he had a hole in there like that. And naturally we thought he was dead, you know.
- James: Right, he got hit right in the forehead.
- Russ: Right in the forehead, yeah. Well, I had coffee with him three weeks ago. [laughs]
- James: The bullet must have used all of its energy hitting the helmet.
- Russ: Yeah. He's got a big scar here but he lived.
- James: Did he say how far that bullet went in?
- Russ: No, he never did. But the funny story about him, he was hit on Tarawa, and the mortar was one of our own shells. Not a mortar, it was one of our own shells that came in too close. He said it tore the skin right off his legs. But anyhow, he got patched up in Tarawa and went into Iwo with us. Got hit in the head in Iwo and carried off. Went to Hawaii to the hospital, went out and got drunk and fell out of a third story hotel room, and his nickname is Lucky. [laughs] He was quite a guy.
- James: Where does he live?
- Russ: Oh God, I got it all at home. I got the picture of him and—
- James: Well what state, then?

- Russ: I can't remember. I think Florida; he's in Florida now, yeah. He gave us his autograph and all. He's quite a guy, still drinking the beer in the morning. But I couldn't believe it when, you know, got talkin' about what outfit ya in, and [I said] "I was in there." "You were!" and he went upstairs and he had a roster that our sergeant kept and brought it down and I said—
- James: And it was the same guy that you thought for sure was dead?
- Russ: Same guy, yeah. And I told him the story and he said, "Yeah." He said, "No, they didn't kill me. They knocked the hell out of me, but they didn't"—
- James: He must have been unconscious for a while.
- Russ: Oh yeah, yeah. He was. He had a great big scar here yet after fifty-five years.
- James: They must have taken out a piece of bone then.
- Russ: Yeah, so I was glad I went there that I'd seen him because after all these years I thought the guy was dead, you know. Then we got talking about all our other buddies and that.
- James: Now you were in the 5th Division; which was your regiment then?
- Russ: 27th Marines.
- James: 27th?
- Russ: Yeah. 28th is the one that took Mount Suribachi.
- James: Right. 27th Regiment. Now how many survived at Iwo Jima?
- Russ: How many survived?
- James: I mean, how many did you lose? Killed and wounded, I mean.
- Russ: Well they had, uh, they had over seven thousand, uh, dead, and uh—
- James: Yeah, but that's the whole operation.
- Russ: That was the whole operation.
- James: But your regiment?
- Russ: I really don't know; I really don't. I know that they set on the beach, landing on the beach we had sixty-five percent casualties, just landing on the beach.

- James: That's easy to figure out then.
- Russ: Yeah, but what gets me is that you had 60,000 Marines against 20,000 Japs, so that's the first time we ever outnumbered the enemy. And, uh, and it took us thirty-six, thirty-eight days to go five miles.
- James: It shows that numbers don't mean everything, do they?
- Russ: No, they don't, uh-huh [disagreement].
- James: If you got position that means a great deal.
- Russ: Right, yeah.
- James: So after things started improving, then it was just a matter of mopping up the caves, is that the main occupation?
- Russ: That's all it was, yeah, yeah. Sometime you'd go, say this hill here and you were takin' this hill and you'd get up on top and take the hill and Christ, they were behind you coming out of their caves.
- James: They'd let you go past?
- Russ: They'd let go past and you gotta come back and fight your way back again. They were dug in, they were—
- James: So what you are saying is that the caves were hard to spot?
- Russ: Oh yeah, oh sure. Well, they were in, they'd take these fifty-gallon drums and bury them in the ground and of course camouflage them, you know.
- James: That's room for one man.
- Russ: Yeah, one guy, and then you'd get by and he'd lift up the cover, "bang," and shoot and you could never find the guy, you know.
- James: You mean he'd go back down in his cubbyhole?
- Russ: Yeah, go back down in the cubbyhole. [laughs] And their tanks there, their tanks they had dug in. They didn't even bother moving them. No, they just had them all—no, they had terrific fire power, yeah. Yeah.
- James: So how did you approach these? Going up the hill and you start looking for these guys, how would you uncover those spots?

- Russ: The only way you can uncover them was when they came out, you know; it was impossible to find them.
- James: Now did you use the flamethrower?
- Russ: Oh yeah, if you'd seen where they were, yeah. Or pick the cover up and throw a grenade in it if you found them. If you found the cover, yeah. Yeah, and then trying to talk the Japs out of the caves, you know, very few. I don't know, we took a hundred, a hundred.
- James: Did you have an interpreter?
- Russ: Oh yeah, we had interpreters, yeah.
- James: But most of them refused to come out?
- Russ: No. No. This general they had that, uh, who was it? One of our generals said, "I hope we don't meet any more generals like him because he was—"
- James: He was one of the best?
- Russ: One of the best, yeah.
- James: So when did you get your first meal, after [pause] was it three days?
- Russ: Well you always had your C-rations when you came in.
- James: Yeah, but you lost that when you came in.
- Russ: Well yeah. No, there was a lot to pick up, so I mean, yeah, in your pack you had—yeah, I picked up another guy's pack and then there was food in there. I think it was about the fifth day they took us back to the beach and of course it didn't make any difference where you were at because they had you sighted in anyhow, you know. Then uh, then we went and of course went and picked up our dead and our wounded and that. And that was worse than the fighting sometimes because, uh, where a guy that was laying dead you know damn well that they had that sighted in, you know. So we did a lot of that. They were stacked up like cordwood on the beach, just in the body bags, yeah. In the body bags. And then they couldn't bury 'em yet because they didn't have enough of the—
- James: The Navy couldn't send in barges to pull them out?
- Russ: They couldn't, some of the boats couldn't get in anymore. The beach was just so cluttered they couldn't get in. They had enough trying to get the wounded off, you know. And they're bringing in new supplies and that. That

beach was just, uh, I don't know if you've ever seen pictures of it, but it was just so crowded that you couldn't get anything in. After that first night you couldn't get in anymore cause it was just cluttered with boats that were hit, you know. There was one guy, a Seabee in a bulldozer, and he was out there plowing the stuff [laughing] just like a Sunday or Saturday afternoon or Friday afternoon. I thought, "Man, that guy's got guts." Of course he had bulletproof glass in his thing, but Christ, I thought if a shell hits him, he's done.

James: Yeah, he's a real target.

Russ: Oh, was he, yeah. But he just kept goin' just like nothing happened, pushing—

James: With stuff rattling off his—

Russ: Yeah, yeah. So they weren't really after guys like him. Then when the tanks came in, then they really went nuts, you know. Then they—

James: What was different then?

Russ: Well they just—

James: They had heavier stock—

Russ: Oh yeah, they just threw everything at them because they hated the tanks. When them tanks come in, you'd get behind them but you never wanted to be on the side of them or anything because that's when they really, and then they—

James: The Japanese put emphasis on—

Russ: On the tanks, yeah. Tanks and these rocket launchers. Rocket launchers pull up and they'd shoot their rockets and away they'd go, you know, geez, and a couple seconds later just the whole area would be sprayed with mortars and heavy artillery.

James: Yeah, so you know to stay away from those guys.

Russ: You stayed away from them guys. You were happy because you knew you weren't going to be fired at for a while because they took, put everything on them guys, yeah. Yeah.

James: So how did this progress now? You eventually got most of them out of their caves and out of the foxholes?

- Russ: Yeah, yeah most. Eventually we fought to the north end of the island and then—
- James: Did you try to take any prisoners or did you just shoot them?
- Russ: Oh you tried, yeah, but they didn't, uh, they wouldn't surrender, see. We got a few of them, but not many.
- James: Well did you make any effort to get them to surrender?
- Russ: Oh yeah! You tried because they wanted information, you know.
- James: So after that, you stayed until the end of the operation?
- Russ: Yeah, I was there right until the end, yeah. I think it was thirty-six or thirty-eight days.
- James: Right. Then did you get some leave?
- Russ: No, we went back to Hawaii and then got ready to hit Japan. I was in on the invasion of Japan too.
- James: You mean Okinawa?
- Russ: No, Japan. Okinawa happened right after Iwo, see.
- James: So you weren't in that?
- Russ: No. We were supposed to be, but there was nothing that much left that they—
- James: It took you so long at Iwo?
- Russ: So long at Iwo, yeah, and then they took—
- James: So then they got you ready to go for Japan?
- Russ: Japan, yeah. We were loaded, we were aboard ship going to Japan when the war ended, but we still went in as an invasion force.
- James: Where?
- Russ: In Kyushu, Sasebo. Sasebo, yeah.
- James: My hospital ship was there for a while.

Russ: Oh was it?

James: Yeah. I spent some time in Sasebo.

Russ: Did you? That was sure flattened, huh?

James: Oh yeah, pretty much.

Russ: Yeah, and we stayed in the naval barracks there. That was about fifteen miles from Sasebo, I think it was.

James: You were just doing occupation duties?

Russ: Yeah. Going in and disarming them and going—

James: Disarming who?

Russ: The Japs.

James: The soldiers or the sailors?

Russ: No, you didn't see any soldiers, no. You just went into where they had them in the caves and—

James: Around Sasebo?

Russ: Yeah, further up.

James: Well, they knew the war was over, right, or not?

Russ: Oh, they knew the war was over, yeah. Yeah. When we landed we went in just like we would land for combat and the only thing there was kids and dogs. That's the only thing we could see, kids and dogs and policemen; you always had their policemen around.

James: Right, but disarming them?

Russ: Didn't see any men, no, didn't see any soldiers or anything.

James: So there really wasn't anybody to disarm there?

Russ: No, no, we just went in these caves and then—

James: Just checked them out?

- Russ: Yeah, and then warehouses, where they had all their rifles and guns and blew up their—
- James: You confiscated all of the—
- Russ: Blew up all their big shore—Christ, they had shore guns that I bet you that they were fifteen-, twenty-inch guns there that—
- James: That'd been a nifty landing there.
- Russ: Yeah, that would have been. Yeah. When people say that they should have never dropped the atom bomb—
- James: That's nonsense.
- Russ: That's nonsense is right, because we would have the—they claim we would have had a million casualties landing from Tokyo on down, yeah, and I can see it. Well we went in—well, the harbor then, when we went in there it took us almost a whole day to get in that harbor. We had a Jap pilot in there and that was so mined, we didn't go—
- James: Oh, the mines hadn't been cleared out?
- Russ: No, they hadn't been cleared out.
- James: That will make you nervous then.
- Russ: And then this, uh, Jap pilot, he steered the ship in, yeah. I think it took us all day, from morning until it was almost night before we got in there. Because that's a pretty long harbor in there.
- James: Yes, it's a big harbor.
- Russ: Yeah, and he guided us in there. Well what got me was after Iwo then, and then they start—the war with Europe was over and they were discharging a lot of these guys with seventy points, you know, and so I had ninety-six by that time, you got so many for—so they said, "Maybe you won't have to go to Japan, you gotta board ship." Well, I was aboard ship already and then the war ended and they said, "Well when you get to Guam, you'll get a ship back." So we got to Guam and no ship, we kept going.—[**End of Tape 1, Side A**]—Got to Japan and ended up going way up in the hills and I was there for, I think it was three months before I got out of there. When I got—
- James: You were in that Sasebo harbor for three months?
- Russ: Yeah, uh-huh [affirmation].

James: Did you go up to Nagasaki and see how the thing was blown up?

Russ: Yup, yeah.

James: I did that too. That was impressive.

Russ: Yes, it was. It sure was. Yeah, that was. Yeah, we went up. Oh, and these roads they had, way up in them hills, you know we went up in six by sixes and they could hardly make the turn in there.

James: The roads were so narrow.

Russ: Yes, so narrow. Of course we got treated well; we stayed in these houses or whatever they had there, you know. They waited on us hand and foot and all that. Yeah, that was a good experience. Well now I'm glad I did go, but at the time I was really mad. I thought, "Geez." When I got back to the Great Lakes they were discharging them at forty-five points. The guys said, "Where the hell were you?" I said, "Yeah, tell me." [laughs]

James: [unintelligible] [laughs] Right. How did you get back to the United States? By ship?

Russ: By ship, yeah. Everything was by ship.

James: The whole unit? The whole division?

Russ: No, no, just the ones, no, no.

James: Just the ones that had points?

Russ: No, just the ones that had points, yeah.

James: So they kept a lot of Marines in there?

Russ: Oh yeah, they kept—a lot of them went over to China.

James: They did occupation duty there in China too?

Russ: Oh yeah, yeah. See, all your regulars are guys that their time wasn't up, they had to stay, you know. It didn't matter how many points they had.

James: So after you got back home, what did you do?

Russ: What did I do when I got back home?

James: Did you go back to Wauwatosa?

Russ: Yeah, I went back to Wauwatosa, yeah. I had malaria and uh—

James: Yeah, we didn't talk about any of that, we sort of passed over some of the details that I want to talk about.

Russ: Yeah. The first time we got back in '43, when they disbanded the Paratroops and I had malaria and I had jungle rot and had dysentery, which almost everybody got. I had jungle rot on my leg and my mouth and my hands and of course when I got back to the States then that healed up pretty good.

James: Yeah, you get out of that moisture.

Russ: Moisture, yeah.

James: How about the malaria?

Russ: Malaria, I had uh—

James: How many attacks?

Russ: Two attacks when I got home on furlough and when I got home I weighed a hundred and thirty-eight pounds. I could hear my mother yell, "Bill," my dad's named Bill, "Bill, he's not going back!" [laughs]

James: "I'm not going to let him!" [laughs]

Russ: My dad says, "What are you going to do with him, hide him in the attic?" She said, "Yeah." [both laugh] She said, "The Marines tell me to send me your boy and I'll give you a man." She said, "I gave them the boy and they sent me back a little kid." Yeah, I weighed a hundred and thirty-eight pounds. I was a sick son of a gun.

James: I'll bet. The malaria hit you pretty hard?

Russ: Yeah, real. That takes the living Jesus right out of you.

James: Yeah, the fever is really fierce.

Russ: Yup, you just shake.

James: Yeah, I've taken care of a lot of patients with malaria.

Russ: Have ya? Yeah. Well you're a doctor, aren't you?

James: Yeah.

Russ: So anyhow, I had here about, oh, I'd say ten or twelve years ago I had an attack, but the doctor said, "No, that wasn't malaria."

James: Yeah, I'm surprised if that was an attack, that long.

Russ: Yeah, but I'll tell you what, whatever it was it seemed like malaria.

James: Sure. Same thing with chills and fever?

Russ: Oh, chills and fever and you couldn't get warm, yeah. But since that time I haven't been—

James: Did you go to the VA hospital when you were in Milwaukee?

Russ: Yeah, I went to Woods. I fought them for fifteen years. I have bad knees and bad legs.

James: Oh, what disability did they give you?

Russ: Nothing, nothing, I fought 'em. When I got to Great Lakes—see, when I got blown out of that boat, I got hurt and then, uh, one time, I forget, we were on maneuvers or something. This was after, this was in Hawaii, I think, and my legs used to just swell right up; contusions they call them, I guess. So when I got to Great Lakes, you know, it was on my records and they said, "You got any complaints?" and I said, "Yeah, my legs!" and they said, "Well, we'll put you in the hospital." I said, "Put me in a hospital! You haven't put me in a hospital all these years now. So here I'm eighty miles from home; can I go to a hospital in Milwaukee?" and they said, "Yeah, there's Woods, but you got to sign a paper while I sign it off." So in them days when you got a job, you know, jobs weren't that plentiful when you come back and every time you went to Woods, you had to take a day off and that. So after fifteen years I just gave up.

James: So what type of work did you do when you got home?

Russ: I was a salesman. I sold Kirby vacuum cleaners for thirty-five years. Then I went into the insurance business. I was a salesman all my life, yeah.

James: Did you join any veterans organizations?

Russ: Oh yeah. In fact, I joined the VFW on the way back the first time. Some guy from California signed me up. And then I'm a member of the VFW here and I'm one of the guys that started this Marine Corps League here. We started this about fifteen years ago.

James: How big is the group here?

Russ: We've got over three hundred-some signed, but you know how that is. We got about a hundred-fifty that are paid and most are delinquent. We got about twelve or fifteen good workers, like any organization.

James: Right, typical. And you joined the Marine League? I'm sure there is a regular Marine League, a national league.

Russ: Yeah. This is the Marine Corps League.

James: This is a branch of the national—

Russ: Right, the national organization. Yeah.

James: And you obviously attend those national meetings from time to time.

Russ: Oh yeah, I used to. I don't anymore. I had two new knees put in and I have trouble sitting in the car any longer, so I don't. But I'm real active here. I was the first commandant here. When we first started the League we bought a popcorn truck and we went to all the fairs and all that and made money and bought an old farmhouse that used to sit right in here and then we built this.

James: From popcorn money?

Russ: On the popcorn truck, yeah.

James: Well that's pretty good.

Russ: Yeah, we still run that. We got to the Thresheree in Edgerton and Shopiere here and different events.

James: Do you keep track of anybody who was in your unit?

Russ: Huh?

James: Is there anybody in your unit that you keep track of?

Russ: No, not really. Outside of, like I say, when I went back on the fifty-fifth anniversary of Iwo Jima I met a lot of guys that I know and—

James: But otherwise you don't keep in contact with anybody?

Russ: No, no, I haven't really kept in contact with anybody.

James: What awards did you win, Russ? Other than the Purple Heart.

Russ: Nothing.

James: Didn't your unit get a unit citation?

Russ: Well yeah, we had a Presidential Unit Citation, oh yeah.

James: Yeah, even our hospital ship got two of those.

Russ: Did ya? Good! Yeah, that's a good award.

James: So do you think your experience and the training that you got in the Marine Corps served you well when it counted?

Russ: Oh yeah.

James: In other words, they didn't miss anything, they told you what you needed?

Russ: Oh yeah. We were well trained.

James: You were trained well with the rifle and so forth?

Russ: Oh yeah, everybody. That's one thing about the Marine Corps; everybody that goes in is a rifleman.

James: And they make sure they know what they are doing?

Russ: Make sure you know what you're doing, oh yeah. There was a couple of goof-offs, you know, just like in any outfit, but generally—

James: Fewer than in other outfits, though?

Russ: Yeah, yeah. Well of course the Marine Paratroopers and Marine Raiders, they got really excessive training and everything, you know.

James: Now they are all part of the Seals now.

Russ: Yeah, I guess so, yeah.

James: The Seals seem to do everything. They're like Paratroopers, underwater demolition, they do it all.

Russ: Yeah, yeah, they're great, they're great. I've seen a film on their training. Man, oh man.

James: I've seen it a couple of those. I'm impressed.

Russ: I am too!

James: That's not for the faint hearted.

Russ: No, and I forget what the percentage that make it, about fifty-five percent that go in only make it.

James: Less than that, I think. I think when it comes down to it, it was closer to ten percent.

Russ: Is it?

James: Yeah. If you include the school and make all the stops.

Russ: But I was impressed when I went out to this reunion and seen the young Marines. It made you feel good, it really did, to see that we're still in good hands, we really are. Because when we went to the memorial, the Iwo Jima memorial, they must have had about six hundred Marines there that welcomed us and about a hundred officers. God, they treated us royally. It really was good. And you look at them guys, and gals, I gotta say now—see, when I first when in, we didn't have gals. Man, they're sharp, they really are, they're still a really sharp outfit. I'm proud of the Marine Corps, I really am.

James: You should be. Tell me about your medical facilities. How about your doc, your corpsmen in your outfit?

Russ: Oh nothing greater, nothing greater.

James: They seem to be able to drag enough supplies ashore to bandage you up?

Russ: Oh yeah. But the corpsmen, you know, it's bad, just like, when a guy got wounded, you know, he was in the line of fire or something and the corpsman had to go there. We didn't have enough corpsmen, we really didn't.

James: You didn't have enough?

Russ: No. The first day when I got hit in that boat and I didn't know if it was shrapnel I got on my side or what but I was pretty well banged up, and I was in the aid station waiting for somebody to take care of me and this captain come in and said, "Anybody that can walk," he said, "we got to get going; you can't waste your time here." [laughs] He said, "You all got first aid kits so fix each other up and let's go!" And that's what we did.

James: That was it?

Russ: Yeah, uh-huh [affirmation].

James: Was the skin broken on your hip?

Russ: Yeah.

James: You needed a bandage then?

Russ: Yeah, just a bandage, that's all. Yeah.

James: So that was your treatment? [laughs]

Russ: That was the treatment, yeah. But when you did get hit, unless it was real bad you felt guilty because, you know.

James: I was always impressed in the Korean War that the Marines never left anybody.

Russ: No.

James: I had a friend who was in the Army. He was in a MASH unit. He said, "I had to operate with one eye out the canvas door because if things got hot I had to make sure they weren't going to leave us there." A lot of those guys, those MASH units were left. But that *never* happened in the Marine Corps. They would *never* leave anybody, no matter what.

Russ: When we were sent out to pick up wounded, and of course they were spotted, they all had their rifles gone[?] with the helmet, and boy, if you didn't come back with them, you caught holy hell. You had to give a damn good reason, there was just so much fire you just couldn't get in there, you know. But we took every one of our wounded back, yeah. Yeah, and the dead, and the dead.

James: When you got around to it, yeah.

Russ: Yeah, when you got around to that.

James: So they must have buried a lot of them at sea?

Russ: Yeah, a lot of them were buried at sea then.

James: Not much point [unintelligible].

- Russ: Yeah, cause there is nothing Japs like better than to get a hold of a wounded guy, you know, and then have them screaming at night, you know, that you'd come out. There was nothing you could do, you just had to listen to it.
- James: What would they do?
- Russ: Well they would torture 'em, you know and then—
- James: On purpose?
- Russ: On purpose, and then they would have a—
- James: Make them yell and then—
- Russ: Hollering his buddy's name, you know. "Come help me, Bob, help me, Bob." You know. Uh, Christ there was nothing you could do. In fact, if you got up at night and crawled out of your hole, your own men would shoot you, you just didn't dare move.
- James: Anything that moved got shot?
- Russ: Got shot, you bet. Yeah, yeah.
- James: You just couldn't play it any other way?
- Russ: No, you couldn't, no. Uh-uh [disagreement]. It was hard, but uh, but you always had there an officer or sergeant or something and he'd say, "You just stay here now and don't you move, 'cause if the Japs don't get you, we're gonna get you." 'Cause you're giving away your position, you know.
- James: Right, that was the order.
- Russ: That was order. You had to obey it.
- James: Stay here.
- Russ: No matter how much that guy screamed or hollered, and it hurt. You felt bad that you couldn't help him, you know, but—
- James: When the daylight came, would you make an effort to find this guy?
- Russ: Oh yeah, then you would try. By that time he was—
- James: He was dead.

- Russ: Dead. Yeah. But some of them would be laying out there by themselves, you know, in the daytime and then you'd go and get them.
- James: Did you see any of those guys that spend all that night, and when you got to them in the morning they were still alive?
- Russ: Oh yeah, yeah. Oh, quite a few of them, yeah.
- James: I suppose a lot of them maybe played dead or had them fooled.
- Russ: Oh yeah, they had to, yeah. Oh yeah, they played dead. Of course some of them were knocked out and uh, but some of them bled to death, you know, by the time you got to them. So, yup.
- James: Okay, what else. Oh, did you get any mail when you were over in Iwo?
- Russ: Yeah. Uh-huh [affirmative]. In fact, I've still got some of them letters that I got, yeah. At the mail call—
- James: So you were there a month?
- Russ: Yeah, we got mail call. I think it was about the tenth day or so we got mail. Yeah, that was good, and then we could write them, you could write right from there.
- James: Oh, you could send letters out?
- Russ: Yeah, we could send letters out then, yeah, and you could put on Iwo, I'm on Iwo at that time—
- James: Oh, they didn't care?
- Russ: No, they didn't care then because everybody in the world knew it. [laughs]
- James: [laughs] There's no mystery.
- Russ: No. I had to laugh, you know. You couldn't tell this and tell that and Tokyo Rose, she would name every outfit and everything.
- James: When did you hear her?
- Russ: Oh, all the time; whenever you were near the radio you could hear her.
- James: When you were back at some base?
- Russ: Oh yeah, even aboard ship and then they would pick her up.

James: Yeah, they wanted to know what she had to say.

Russ: Yeah, and they knew—

James: She would name—

Russ: She would name outfits—

James: Outfits, names, everything.

Russ: Captain's names, general's names, and the ship you were on and oh, Christ.

James: Then tell you where you were going?

Russ: Where you're going, yeah!

James: Even though you didn't know.

Russ: You didn't know, no, and you couldn't write and tell them. Nobody could know in the States, but the whole of Japan knew where you were going, yeah. [laughs]

James: That lady who did that served, I think it was fifteen years, sixteen years in prison.

Russ: Yeah, yeah. I've seen her story on that History Channel, yeah.

James: Yeah, it's interesting.

Russ: Yeah. And a lot of these Jap officers were trained in the United States. This one general they had here, he was a big polo player and I didn't know where he went, to Harvard or some school like that. Yeah.

James: Yeah, I interviewed one guy who was a Japanese fellow. He was in an internment camp and his cousin had gone over to Japan to visit his family. Then all of a sudden the war started and they wouldn't let him out, he couldn't come back to the United States. He had never been to Japan before.

Russ: Oh! Just went for a visit?

James: Well, went to visit the old family. Visit one last time. That sealed it, he was in the army, they just shoved right in the army. He said, "I could barely speak Japanese." That was a different twist.

Russ: Yeah, right. Yeah, they had a Marine over there, I got a picture of him someplace, sitting there with his cane. He was eighty-some years old and he was in the Marines and then married a Japanese gal and of course lived there. Of course when the war broke out—but they didn't do nothing to him, they just—

James: He stayed there and didn't move and nobody bothered him.

Russ: He stayed there and didn't move and yeah, nobody bothered him.

James: Yeah, I suppose if he tried to do something, then—

Russ: Oh yeah. I imagine they watched him, you know, especially him being in the Marine Corps. Yeah, but they never touched him, he said.

James: Well, I've sort of run out of questions.

Russ: Okay.

James: Did I miss anything?

Russ: No, I don't think so. [laughs]

James: Okay. Well I sure appreciate your taking the time for me. It's really very nice.

Russ: I don't know if this interview that I had in Washington there—

[End of Interview]