

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
RALPH SCHMITZ  
Signalman, Navy, World War II.

2002

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**Schmitz, Ralph “Mike”,** (1928-2011). Oral History Interview, 2002.

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:**

Ralph “Mike” Schmitz, a Port Washington, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service with the Navy in the Pacific theater. Schmitz talks about falsifying his birth date to enlist in the Navy at age sixteen, boot camp at Great Lakes (Illinois), and assignment to an AKA (Attack Transport) sent to New Guinea. Working on shore building at a supply base, he comments on duty loading ammunition onto ships and transferring supplies from liberty ships to shore. He tells of an accidental casualty in his group. Schmitz discusses propaganda drops by Japanese airplanes, seeing Japanese soldiers taken prisoner when they snuck into the American chow lines, and visiting a nearby Army hospital. He speaks of Victory Mail, the food in New Guinea, and fitting in as an underage sailor. Schmitz describes his reaction to visiting a native village. Transferred to the Gilbert Islands in 1945, he talks about cleaning up the debris left from the Battle of Tarawa. He speaks of duty as a signalman and helmsman aboard an LCT and tells an anecdote about hitting a ship at night. He portrays having recreation in the native villages and seeing a USO show featuring Les Brown. Schmitz refers to photographs he took and being issued invasion money in preparation for the invasion of Japan. Near the end of the war, he reports thinking that the officers on his ship put too much emphasis on discipline. Schmitz describes his homecoming, getting a high school equivalency diploma, living on money from the GI Bill’s “52-20 club,” and eventually getting a job on a line crew at Bell Telephone Company. He touches on joining the American Legion and an underage veterans’ association. Schmitz comments on being grateful for the atomic bomb drops and the maturing effect of his service.

**Biographical Sketch:**

Schmitz (1928-2011) served in the Navy from 1944 to 1946. After the war, he settled in his hometown of Port Washington (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by Evan Kichura, 2002

Transcribed by Katy Marty, 2011

Edited by Joan Bruggink, 2011

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2012

**Interview Transcript:**

Evan: February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2002, we are at my grandparents' home in Port Washington, Wisconsin. I am speaking today with my grandfather, Ralph Schmitz, who goes by the name Mike. I am Evan Kichura and my mother, Shelly Kichura, is helping me with the videotaping. Grandpa, I know you served in the Navy during World War II, but can you tell us what your rank was and where you served?

Ralph: I reached the high rank of Seaman 1<sup>st</sup> class.

Evan: Why did you enlist?

Ralph: I guess it was patriotism. Everyone—well, the war was a big thing and I didn't want to run out of time and not be able to get in, I guess.

Evan: Why did you choose the Navy? How did it come about?

Ralph: Well, I—you know, living next to Lake Michigan and working at a fish company at the docks and then being able to go out on the fish\_\_\_ [?], I guess I just moved towards the Navy rather than any other service.

Evan: Tell us about how you joined the Navy.

Ralph: Well, I went in when I was sixteen years old. My parents decided that seeing that I wasn't that that hepped [?] up on high school, which I had just went into the sophomore—based on that if I could talk the Navy into—even though I was underage, that if I could get my birth certificate to reflect seventeen years old, they would sign it, permission. Which I did, and they accepted it, and they signed. So that's how I wound up in the Navy.

Evan: How did you feel when you joined the Navy?

Ralph: Um, I don't quite—how did I feel?

Evan: What was your feeling like when you first got into the Navy, when you first arrived at boot camp?

Ralph: Well, I enlisted with one other fella, a friend of mine from Port Washington. And when we got to Great Lakes, Illinois training station, we were mustered in and then he wound up in a dental company, which meant he had teeth problems so he wound up in a dental company. I wound up in a regular boot camp company and after that I never seen him again in my tour of duty. Nor did I meet anybody from Wisconsin once I left the Great Lakes.

Evan: What kind of training did they put you through?

Ralph: It was a real quick six weeks deal. Mostly military—what’s the word? I’m trying to think of the word—discipline, you know, and a lot of propaganda, what they expected of you. Like I say, it was six weeks and we were out of here. I had a short nine-day leave to go home and then when we got back that was it, we left.

Evan: Do you remember your instructors? Were they tough or did they make it fun?

Ralph: No, no it was all business. And when you were—you know, I was sixteen years old and the other people, the recruits that were there, were anywhere from nineteen, twenty, twenty-one years old. So I kept my mouth shut and just did what I was told.

Evan: What were your first days at the camp like?

Ralph: Well, I—it wasn’t a homesickness, that’s for sure, because you had—you were too—they had you going all day long. All you had breaks for was chow and in the evenings, oh, I’d say along about 9:00 o’clock you were able to relax on your bunk and that was about it. It was all service.

Evan: When you started to serve during World War II, where exactly did you go?

Ralph: Well, I left, like I said, after our short leave. I got back to Great Lakes and we left the following day for Norfolk, Virginia on a train that took us, I believe—my memory isn’t too good, but I believe it took us about a day and a half to get there. Loaded aboard a AKA [attack transport], which is a Navy ship, for New Guinea. We didn’t know that until later, that that’s where we were going, but that’s where we wound up.

Evan: How long did you stay in the Marshall Islands?

Ralph: New Guinea wasn’t in the Marshall Islands; that was later on. New Guinea, I got there in, I believe it was May of 1944 and I left there, oh, I believe it was like January or February, 1945 which we were transferred from New Guinea to the Gilbert Islands.

Evan: Okay. What was your job? What was your role in the Navy?

Ralph: Amphibious. When we got to New Guinea we off-loaded, which means we went ashore with our landing craft and they were—the Japanese were, by that time they were forced back into the jungle. And the Seabees had been arriving and they were building an advanced naval depot which was the central area for all of the ammunition. Any kind of ammunition that was needed for invasion was at that depot and we were there to load all of the

ships that carried that to the invasions that preceded our landing there. So we had—for the first few months it was about twenty hours a day.

Evan: Were there any casualties?

Ralph: Well, one of the casualties I remember was when we first arrived, one of the, one of the guys that was in our crew, or assigned to a group I was in, slipped off a log that—you gotta understand, it was all mud when we got there. The jungle is mud, so it was all slippery. When he got onshore and we went for our sea bags and stuff we had piled there, he slipped on a log and tripped and fell and broke his neck, so he was the first casualty. He never got—he was on shore for probably about an hour.

Evan: Did you see any combat personally?

Ralph: Not, not *per se*. Not where we actually fired at each other. We had Japanese in the area. We had Japanese bombers fly over in the evening dropping pamphlets, not bombs, pamphlets, trying to stir up the Australians that were on the base. There was lots of Australians. There was Army at this base and up and down New Guinea and they were planning that we were taking over their cities, our supposedly liberties that we had got, that is, the Americans. So when that happened, we used to—we had to dive for the foxholes because we didn't know if they were bombing or if they were, whatever they were going to do.

Evan: Did you make any friends?

Ralph: Yeah, I made one friend from Chicago who passed away here a couple of years ago. Um, it may sound unreasonable, but names, I don't remember names of people that were at boot camp nor later on. I don't know why that is, but I just don't remember the names. We were never became close; I mean, our crews were in and out, back and forth, they were always changing, so I guess that wasn't the most important thing.

Evan: What were some of your most memorable experiences?

Ralph: Well, let's see. In New Guinea I guess the first—one that I remember was the first Japanese that I got really close to was in our chow line. There—we found out later on that there were some of 'em had, I guess, were starving and they were lookin' for food and they would sneak into the chow line, figuring they wouldn't be seen or, or recognized or something. But they would let 'em get up to the chow line, or up right where the food was and then they'd grab 'em, holler at 'em and drag 'em away. That was one, [laughs] one instance; of course, none of us truly felt sorry for 'em. We used to visit the Army hospitals. There was an Army hospital near our base there and the Army were the guys that really, really took a pounding there. They were, they were really

in bad shape. Most of us felt sorry for 'em, so we used to—a few times when we had time off, we'd go say hello to 'em there, talk and whatever. But again, I never met anybody from Wisconsin.

Evan: Did you ever get any medals or citations?

Ralph: No, no, I never did. Never had the opportunity, I guess.

Evan: Did you have trouble getting supplies?

Ralph: Um, not in the beginning, because we were a supply depot. When we got to the Gilbert Islands, when we transferred to there, they were brought in periodically by Liberty ship. I don't know; someone somewhere must have said well, listen, these bunch of guys need this food or whatever and somewhere down the line a Liberty ship would come in. I, ah, we were there—I was there from like I say maybe January or February of '45 until I left there, ah, I believe it was January of '46.

Evan: Did you stay in touch with your family?

Ralph: Oh yeah, we had, we had e-mail. Ah, not e-mail, I'm getting' confused here; that's computer stuff. V mail, "V" as in Victor mail.

Evan: What does Victor mail mean?

Ralph: It was mail that you wrote on a preprinted piece of paper that folded up into an envelope, but that letter then was photographed and miniaturized so that they could send an awful lot of mail in a small container, and then I believe it was resurrected when it got back to the States here, I think that's the way it went.

Evan: What was the food like?

Ralph: What was the what?

Evan: The food like.

Ralph: Oh, the food was typical Navy food. I mean, it wasn't gourmet eating, that's for sure. But when we first bounced back and forth before we got into New Guinea, the food was—for the first week or so it was nothing but C-rations. Anyone in the service knows what C-rations are. We got packages of food and you could heat it up if you had something to heat it on, if you had fire or whatever. And then you had gum in there and you had cigarettes and various—sometimes it'd be ham and eggs, sometimes it would be, you name it, they had it. It was edible.

Evan: Did it taste any good?

Ralph: Not really, not really. Later on when we got the regular, the regular chow line, or the cooks and that, when that was set up, then we got some fairly decent food. It was warm and it was—well, I mean, what you are gonna, who are you gonna complain to, you know?

Evan: Did you ever feel like you made a mistake enlisting so young?

Ralph: No, never. I grew up in a hurry. But no, I didn't. I think I probably was wondering what I was doing there, but no, I never, ever thought that maybe I made a mistake, no.

Shelly: [Unintelligible voice in background]

Ralph: At sixteen years old, ah, I couldn't talk on the same plane as these other guys because they were a little more mature, obviously more mature than I, so I did more listening than, than talking. So you weren't considered an outsider, or I didn't consider me an outsider, but I just didn't—the only guy that I really could talk to later on was this fella, this friend of mine from Chicago. But he was older; I believe that he was in his late twenties, early thirties actually. And he didn't—I didn't fool him. He knew what the deal was, that I was underage and that, and so he, he kind of took me under the wing and—

Evan: How'd you entertain yourselves?

Ralph: Well, ah, getting, going back to New Guinea, we, on our—later on when things started to get to settle down and it was gettin' to be a routine, then we were able to have a little time off once in a while and we would—some of us guys would get together, we'd go up this, this jungle stream and up there, about two or three miles back in the jungle, there was a village, native village there. And that was, that was something else. These were, were strictly native. They didn't know what civilization was. They were, they lived in huts that were on stilts because of the wet weather. They were up off the ground and it was just a filthy mess, I guess. I don't know how they could survive without dying of whatever disease because there was no sanitary conditions whatsoever, nothin'. After while you got a little bit leery, you didn't know if you were welcome or whatever, so we used to just say "hi", walk around a little bit and turn around and hike back down again. It was some kind of recreation that we thought we could enjoy, but it was an education there just to see those natives.

Evan: Did you have any USO shows or entertainers come to your unit?

Ralph: We were told we were gonna have a USO show there, but in my experience, in my length of stay there we had no USO shows. We were supposed to—the word was out that after six months we were supposed to get some leave to

Australia, like Sydney or Brisbane, but that never developed. By the time anything even got started, gossip started going around, we were, or I was personally loaded on a plane and started to transfer over to the Gilberts, so I never got to go to Australia, even though I was there for almost a year.

Evan: What did you do at the Gilbert Islands?

Ralph: Well, there we were, we went on an LCT permanently. That was a landing craft; that was a landing craft tank, L-C-T. And to tell you the truth, from that time Tarawa was all over with and we were just there; we didn't accomplish anything. So we just marked time there and survived, that's about it.

Evan: What's Tarawa?

Ralph: That was where a fierce battle was fought in '40—the latter part of '43, I think it was. That's where the Marines got slaughtered. There was a lot of evidence of that around when we got there. In fact, they had bulldozed the bunkers, bulldozed 'em closed with Japanese in 'em yet, and when we were there they were cleaning—oh, that was one of the things we had to do. We had to, we started cleaning off the island. In other words, taking all of the debris and either hauling it out in the ocean and dumping it or got rid of it one way or the other. And one other thing was we had to open up these bunkers. And when you open up the bunkers, you had to wait for a few days for it to air out because you had to go in and then they had guys to drag the bodies out, what was left of 'em, and that's where, that was where I got that Japanese pistol.

Evan: Did you ever get any leaves?

Ralph: No, none. Oh, well I should say when I got back, when I finally got back, then we all had a thirty-day leave, but while I was over there, no, there was no leave, there was no nothing.

Evan: Did you do any pranks on anybody?

Ralph: Ahh, not—I wouldn't call it a prank, but over in the Gilbert Islands we had to go out on Liberty ships and bring stuff in, food stuffs and what have you with these LCTs. And back those days—well, I was the signalman and the helmsman on that thing, signalman meaning that semaphore flags, which is a set, a pair of flags that you signal, you spell out words that way, and then you have a light that you flash off and on and you use the Morse code for that. And we used to have to talk to the ship to find out where we were supposed to—what hatch we were supposed to come to. At night we weren't allowed to use any lights, everything was blacked out, so we didn't know what hatch we were supposed to go in, so we just went out there by moonlight and when we got to it we came on the one side of the ship which obstructed us from the moon so it was completely black and we thought we were coming parallel to



it; instead we were coming right at it and we hit it right in the middle. [laughs] And everybody—well, some of ‘em were in the bunks already and they rolled out of the bunks and the ship’s lights, they came on. They must’ve thought they was torpedoed, but they weren’t, and we damaged our LCT to the point where we found out that the following morning—we had tied up there in the evening and they were loading in the following morning and when we did, we found that we were startin’ to settle in the water because we must have punctured the hull of the LCT. We didn’t hurt the ship but we punctured the hull so we hadda hurry up and put it on shore. We just drove it up on shore like it was a normal landing and when the tide went out, then we found the hole and we were able to weld it shut. And then when the tide came in again we just backed off.

Evan: Do you recall any unusual events?

Ralph: Well, let’s see. Other than that, let’s see. We used to go over to the native villages later on and we used to talk to the chief at this one particular village and we used to take a lot of canned food and stuff over there for him because then you, we were welcomed on the island. And then when you were there, then they had, we used to have dancing and a little celebration. We used to consume some what they call native beer. It was made out of coconut milk. Which gave you a headache in the morning after you had too much of that. We learned some of the hula dances there and we enjoyed ourselves doing that, because it was boring otherwise because the war was just about over and there was really no reason for us to be there.

Evan: Do you have any photos?

Ralph: Yeah, I’ve got some. Now, these are basically what I took. This is that Robert and that was his wife. This is when I had liberty when I got back, we went to Chicago. Here’s a real—[unintelligible mixed voices] Grandpa. [pause] Here’s some pictures of myself and two others. Here, that’s me, and I believe, if I remember right, this was over in the Gilbert Islands. This is on Tarawa. That was part of the—this guy here in the center here, this guy in the center there, he was the photographer. This, I might add, this is the first time we seen a USO troop. There was a USO troop there: Les Brown. And that guy I showed you in the middle there, he was a photographer, and I conned him into carrying his film and bulbs and stuff; that way I got to sit up in the front.

Shelly: So you did go see a USO show?

Ralph: Not in New Guinea. Only in the Gilbert Islands we had one show, one USO show. The other pictures here, here’s the USO troupe. That was when we sunk the LCT. When we left it was too expensive to bring it back home, so we just dumped ‘em. [pause] This here you might find interesting. This was supposed

to have been invasion money if and when we ever invaded the Japanese islands.

Shelly: Really?

Ralph: Yeah, that's what they call invasion money and they started to hand that stuff out.

Shelly : How much did you get?

Ralph: Oh, I saved one example here. This is a one dollar bill, a peso they call it.

Shelly: How much did they give you at a time and for what reason?

Ralph: Well, they just wanted you to have some of this, and I guess—I don't know, I think we got like maybe fifty dollars worth at the time.

Shelly: So if you ever went into Japan you would have had money?

Ralph: Yeah, they would have had—you know, they would have had to make the monetary thing comparable to us with the invasion. But I only saved one. I don't know.—[End of Tape 1, Side 1]—But we never used it, obviously.  
: These pictures are kind of small, but there's a lot of 'em here with the bomb craters and stuff over New Guinea and some of those—here, now these, something like that one picture of the—I have no idea what their names are; that's what frustrates me, why I can't think of what their names are, and I spent a lot of time with those guys on that same LCT, but I guess it's just one of those things. [pause]

Shelly: Anything else you want to show us?

Ralph: Well, there's some here of the native girls, but I don't think you can see 'em very good. See the Gilbert Islands in 1944 or '45. [pause] That's me in the middle.

Evan: Yeah. This is too much. Anything else you want to tell us?

Ralph: Well, I guess that's about the extent of it, I think.

Evan: What did you think of the officers, your fellow soldiers?

Ralph: We had an ensign on—they were all ensigns but the officers on the landing craft, and I didn't think very highly of 'em, not because they weren't good guys, I guess, but some of their discipline wasn't, I didn't think was necessary, but—

Evan: Give us an example.

Ralph: Well, you had to stand watch four on, eight off, and if you wanted to go ashore and you got somebody else to stand your watch, you know, he was one of the guys that said, "This is your watch, this is what you're doin', that's what you're here for," and that was it. There was no—it was all black and white, there was no gray areas. I guess that's the only real complaint that I got against—well, the discipline. I didn't think it was very important at the end of the war if you stood watch or if you didn't stand watch.

Evan: What did you do days and then weeks later?

Ralph: Well, actually—

Evan: Do you recall the day your service ended?

Ralph: Are you talking about when I got out—

Evan: Yeah.

Ralph: —or when I left the—

Evan: When you got out.

Ralph: Got out?

Evan: Yeah.

Ralph: When I got, we came back—when I got back, we hit San Diego, then we got a train to the—I got a train to the Great Lakes, and from the Great Lakes then we were allowed a leave of thirty days. So then when I—I still hadn't seen the folks yet, I hadn't been home yet, so when I got, when I—I took a train to Milwaukee and they were gonna meet me there. And I guess there was some confusion on what time that I was gonna arrive there, because they never ran into me, I never ran into them. So I took what they called the interurban from Milwaukee to Port Washington, it was still running then. It was a streetcar. I took that and I come home here and my younger brother met me. For some reason or another he was walking on the street in Port Washington right near where the depot was for the streetcar, and when I got off he was just a little ways away, and he seen me and he was the first guy I seen when I got to Port Washington. Then him and I went home and it was about another forty-five minutes later my folks came and I'm—they were still discussing who got the wrong time. [laughs] So anyhow, it was a happy hello and I was glad to be back.

Evan: After you got back did you go back to school?

- Ralph: No. I had an opportunity to, though. Some of us that were back at the same time, different services, I would visit up at high school. We were allowed to sit in the classrooms, but it—there was no way that I could carry on a conversation because what I was doing was way beyond what they were doing. I couldn't relate very well, so I didn't spend too much time in the classrooms. But I did later on get an equivalency diploma. A lot of us went back in for eight hours, or six hours, I guess it was, took a bunch of tests and then you got an equivalency diploma.
- Evan: How old were you?
- Ralph: When I got back? Nineteen.
- Evan: So then did you get a job instead of going back to school?
- Ralph: Well, when we came back we were, we were—there was what they call the fifty-two twenty club. It was you got twenty bucks a week for fifty-two weeks, and it was a lot of us decided that we were gonna accept the government's offer for fifty-two weeks. Well, it didn't set so good, you know, after a while, and understandably so, it didn't set too good with the folks, you know, sittin' around for fifty-two weeks doin' nothing. So—
- Shelly: What were you expected to do when you returned?
- Ralph: Get a job. The government didn't expect you to get a job.
- Shelly: For what reason did they pay you twenty dollars a week to do what? I mean just—
- Ralph: That's what the government gave you for being in service. You had fifty-two weeks—you got the fifty-two twenty club. Everybody that came back belonged to the fifty-two twenty club.
- Shelly: If you got a job, then you lost the twenty dollars?
- Ralph: Yeah. So the object was to try to hang in there as long as you could to get those twenty dollars. It was [laughs] funny, I thought.
- Evan: Did you maintain any close friendships after the war?
- Ralph: Only this Lew Roberts I had mentioned previous. Him, we visited every once in a while, and then we sent Christmas cards later on back and forth. But it was—for the first few years it was an ongoing friendship, but then it started to taper off and it was just Christmas cards and then later on I found out he passed away, and that took care of that. The other guys, like I say again, I

don't know who they were. At the time I did, but I don't remember who they were or where they were from.

Evan: Did you join any veterans' organizations?

Ralph: Yeah, I belong to the American Legion. My dad belonged to that, so it was a forgone conclusion when you get out of the service I joined the American Legion, and then later on there was an underage military veteran's association that I belong to. Because there was a lot of times where most of us were afraid—and there's a lot of guys who were, underage guys who were in the service and they were, we were afraid to say anything because we might lose any kind of benefits we might have gotten from the government as ex-GIs or ex-servicemen, so—but now that's been taken care of for a long time already, that if you were in, you served and got an honorable discharge, you're entitled to whatever.

Evan: What was your career after the war?

Ralph: I bounced around in a couple of companies in Port Washington, but I could never handle inside jobs, so my mother worked for what we called "Ma Bell" [AT&T] in those days, the telephone company, the local telephone company. And she persuaded me to apply for a job there, which I did, along with a bunch of other guys from Port Washington, and we wound up on what they—on a line crew. We were hired as linemen, working in and around Port Washington and then later on Milwaukee.

Evan: Was that the only job you really had and stuck with?

Ralph: Yes, that was the only job I really stuck with was the Bell System.

Evan: Did your military experience influence your thinking about the world or about the military in general?

Ralph: Well, I know one thing that regardless of what they say, it was a good thing that we dropped the bombs on 'em. I think it was a necessity that we had to do it.

Evan: So in that sense it gave you a different perspective on the war?

Ralph: Well, in a sense that there were, some felt, obviously, some people felt that it was unnecessary to drop the atomic bomb, and I think you'll find that most of us in the Pacific felt that they could have dropped a few more.

Evan: Do you attend any reunions?

Ralph: No. No, basically because again, I wouldn't know if we even had one. I had no idea who the guys were, their names or where they live. And I guess I don't really have any interest of looking for 'em. You know, in the end it could be as crude as they were here and then they were gone. You were there and then it wasn't long and you might have been gone, so—

Evan: How did your service experience affect your life?

Ralph: You grew up in a hurry, that's for sure. I was much more mature at nineteen than the kids that I would have graduated with if I would have been here, because, again, my experiences and their experiences were altogether different. They were talking about prom dates and we were talking about the Japanese and the war. So I guess I was, felt a lot more mature than a guy that hadn't gone. I learned a lot, but I'm not sorry I ever went, that's for sure.

Evan: Is there anything you'd like to add that we haven't covered in this interview?

Ralph: Well, other than that—most of the time when you talk together with the other guys that were over there, you talk about the good times, very seldom you talk about the bad. And there was good times, too.

Shelly: What were the bad times?

Ralph: The bad times were when—especially in New Guinea, that's where you had the bodies. A lot of times you—except when you visited the hospitals, that Army hospital there, and these guys were comin' in with their leg blown off; that was a downer. And then the hospital ships would show up, either that or the planes would take off with these guys and a lot of them were buried there. They had to lay out a couple of acres dug out of the jungle there where they had crosses. You know, that kind of stuff was there. And then over in the Gilbert Islands there they had, there was—on the airstrip there were six marines buried. There were six crosses there. And I bring this up because here a while ago on television, on the History Channel, they had something to do with Tarawa and it showed those four crosses, or six crosses, and it kind of jolted me, because that's a long time ago and there they were. Yeah, but still. All in all, I learned a lot. It was worthwhile. For your country.

Evan: Well, thanks Grandpa for sharing memories of your service in the Navy. This concludes my interview.

Ralph: Thank you.

**[End of Interview]**