

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
RICHARD C. TOWNSEND
United States Marine Corps, World War II
2004

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Townsend, Richard C., (1924-), Oral History Interview, 2004

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 38 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 38 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Richard Townsend, a native of Anna, Illinois, describes his experiences with the Marines in the Pacific Theater during World War II. Townsend recalls hearing the news of the attack on Pearl Harbor in high school and talks about enlisting in the Marines in 1942. He talks of boot camp and Fleet Marine Force tank training in San Diego (California). Townsend mentions learning to drive the M5A1 tank and shipping to Pearl Harbor, after which he spent most of his time on LSTs. In the 1st Marine Division, 12th Defense Battalion, Townsend speaks of his first campaign at a jungle island, nicknamed “Woodlark,” where it rained for twenty-two days straight. He describes a tough campaign at Peleliu (Caroline Islands), touching on the subjects of casualties and drinking water. He talks about transferring out to a communications outfit as a radar fire control operator and firing at planes on Peleliu. After returning to the States, Townsend recalls hearing about VJ-Day, being discharged, and using the GI Bill to attend college. He highlights what a good thing the GI Bill was for America. He mentions being a member of the VFW and attending reunions. Townsend states he was “just a typical Jar Head.”

Biographical Sketch:

Richard Townsend (b.1924) served in the United States Marine Corps from 1942 through 1945. After service he became a science teacher in the Cahokia, Illinois Public Schools and worked as a Yellowstone park ranger during the summers. Townsend currently lives in Glendale, Wisconsin.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2004.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2004.

Abstract by Susan Krueger, 2009.

Interview Transcript:

John: Okay. This is John Driscoll, and I am a volunteer with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum. Today is March 4, 2004, and I am sitting with Richard C. Townsend in his apartment in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Richard, you are a veteran of the United States Marine Corps?

Richard: That is correct.

John: So am I. And, World War II.

Richard: Yes.

John: So, could we start, where and when were you born?

Richard: When was I born? November 27th, 1924.

John: Where?

Richard: Anna, Illinois.

John: And you grew up there?

Richard: Partially. I lived there until about seven years of age and then our family moved to Urbana, Illinois. That is in west central Illinois. And I lived there until 1940, and then my parents moved back to southern Illinois, into a county home. And I lived there and completed high school there, and, well, one year in Anna Jonesborough, and another year in Dongola, Illinois.

John: Do you remember Pearl Harbor Day?

Richard: What?

John: Do you remember Pearl Harbor Day?

Richard: Very much so.

John: What were you doing?

Richard: Very much. We sat in high school, we listened to that on the radio. President Roosevelt. I remember sitting in the study hall. The study hall teacher brought in a radio and all of us set there in the study hall, and listened to that. I don't know

about students in various classrooms, but that is what we did.

John: And, then, I take it, when did you go into the service?

Richard: I enlisted in the Marines in 1942, July 1, 1942.

John: Okay? Why the Marines?

Richard: I can't answer that. I have no reason. I guess I was a young kid and wanted to be tough.

John: Okay. Where did you enlist?

Richard: St. Louis, Missouri.

John: Okay. And then, where?

Richard: That is where I enlisted. That is where we were inducted, sworn in, and then we traveled by train to San Diego, California. And that is where I went through boot camp. San Diego. And then after boot camp, you know, they line you up like three rows of corn, three ranks. And they say, you, you, and you, you're going here. You, you, and you, you're going there. Great democracy.

John: Yeah.

Richard: And when they got to my name, they said, you're going to the Tank Training Center, the Fleet Marine Force. I thought, what? I don't want to be in any tank. Well, you don't say anything. That is extra police duty, if you say anything. Don't to that. You learn quickly. So I went to the Fleet Marine Force Tank Training Center. And I learned to be a tank man.

John: Okay.

Richard: And then after that--

John: Where was the training center?

Richard: Well, it was in East San Diego, California, way back in a canyon called El Chapati Canyon. And it was called Jacques Farm, and that is literally what it was. It was an old farm that the government had taken over and made a training center out of it. It was very rough and rugged, near the Camp Miramar, where Camp Miramar is today. That is where that was, down in that El Chapati Canyon area. Very rough and rugged, and hardly any facilities at all. And we lived in little two-man tents,

with little kerosene heaters. And that is where he had tank training.

John: Were you a driver?

Richard: Well, we learned to do all facets of the tank training, but that is what I did after we went through training. I was a tank driver, in the crew.

John: I see. How many men in the crew?

Richard: Well, in the tanks that we had, there were four.

John: What kind of tanks were they?

Richard: These were the, the ones we trained in, were a light tank, an M5A1. It was a gasoline-fed engine, a nine cylinder Wright Whirl Away. That is kind of an airplane engine. Of course, now, the Sherman, the Mark 3 Sherman, that had a Chrysler or Cadillac in-line engine, not a radial engine.

John: Okay.

Richard: But I spend most of my time in those light tanks. We had both. And that is what I did. I was a driver.

John: And then, after training?

Richard: Well, we went to San Diego, shipped out from there, and went to Pearl Harbor, to Camp Catlett, near Pearl Harbor. And we trained, well, we did some training, just more or less kind of like a staging area. And then we shoved off, went aboard ship. And, of course, being a tank man, I spent most of my time aboard an LST. That is called a Landing Ship Tank. That is what that abbreviation stands for. It's kind of a flat-bottomed boat. The ship's company sleeps aft, in the back. And it has twin diesel propellers on it. And I mean, that diesel fumes. And the crew slept back there. But we had our equipment with us down in the middle of this LST, and we slept port and starboard of that. And with our equipment, on that LST. Because, you see, those LSTs could go right up on the beaches and the bow of an LST only drew about four feet of water. The stern, about six feet. So right up on the shoreline.

John: When you shipped out of Pearl Harbor, that would have been 194-?

Richard: Two. Oh, yeah. Late '42. Yeah, and then we went to another place, down in New Guinea, to another staging area. And from there we shoved off. Our first campaign was an island called Woodlark. Now, that is the English, or the Australian version

of it. Woodlark. I could get a map and show you, but that is not the real pronunciation of that island. It's something else. But, anyway, that's what we called it. And that was our first campaign. The resistance there wasn't too bad. And we stayed in Woodlark for a while after the campaign, and then we went back to Ora Bay, New Guinea, for some more staging. And for more staging, equipment, and things like that. For our second campaign. Now, our second campaign was Cape Gloucester, New Britain. Now, the Japs had been on that island of New Britain for some time. In fact, they had a nice base, an air base, a nice air strip at Rabaul, at Cape Gloucester. We hit at the Cape area, oh, quite a distance south of there. And it was pretty rugged. We were a little bit premature in going to that campaign, so all of us, practically the whole 7th Fleet was in staging area. I can't even think of the name of it now. And we shoved off, and hit that beachhead on Christmas Day.

John: Oh, wow.

Richard: What a lousy Christmas Day that was.

John: A great way to spend Christmas.

Richard: And it was Christmas Day, and it was in the monsoon time, and you don't think, "Is it going to rain?" In the monsoon time, in the Pacific, it just rains all the time. And during that period in that campaign, it rained for twenty-two straight days before we ever saw any sunlight.

John: Wow.

Richard: And, well, it wasn't easy. It was tough, but, and, of course, the Japanese had that nice big air strip not too far away. And we set up defense and cleaned up what few Japanese were there. And then we just kind of stayed put for a while. There was an Army outfit that also participated in that campaign and, as I say, it was monsoon time, and rained all the time. Lousy, especially in the jungles. We weren't able to use our tanks too much in that. It was swamps and you'd just mire down, so we just had to kind of park them here and there back in the jungles and kind of forget that and do something else. Go on patrol and things like that. But it was a hard time. We stayed there for a while and then we went back to Ora Bay, New Guinea again, and staged for our third campaign which was Peleliu in the Palau Islands, in the southwestern Carolines.

John: My uncle was killed there.

Richard: Was he at Peleliu?

- John: He was an Army tanker, on Angaur.
- Richard: Angaur? Yeah, that was one of them. There was Peleliu, Palau, Angaur. There were several. Those were coral atolls, is what they were.
- John: He was an Army tanker. I don't know what outfit. He was killed there.
- Richard: Yeah, there were several islands in that group of the Palau group. Several of the guys I knew went to Angaur, but I didn't. I stayed on Peleliu. That was a tough campaign. We lost a lot of good Marines on that campaign. And there were pretty close to about 45,000 Japs waiting on us. And, of course, they had been there for some time, and they had really nice gun emplacements, you know, up in those coral ridges, and it was a tough one. Boy, I tell you, we suffered a lot of casualties on that beachhead at Peleliu. What's your next question?
- John: Okay, I remember reading now about Peleliu. Didn't they have a water problem there? Weren't they short of water?
- Richard: Well, you're always generally short of, you know, potable water. But even on Cape Gloucester, where it rained practically all the time in the monsoon period, I mean you were still at a loss for potable water.
- John: Okay.
- Richard: Anywhere. Yeah. There was lots of sea water but you can't drink that. But, we got supplied, and we made out. But that Peleliu was probably, that was a real, as I said before, a tough campaign. We suffered a lot of casualties. Heavy casualties in the American forces. And we got rid of a lot of Japanese on that.
- John: That would have been 1943, then?
- Richard: No, that was my third campaign. That would be in '44. Because after the campaign on Peleliu, I got to come home. Now, before that, on Cape Gloucester, since we didn't use our tanks hardly at all because of the jungles and swamps, I got a chance to transfer out and I asked to go into a communications outfit. And that is what I did. I was a radar fire control operator.
- John: Oh, okay.
- Richard: For a 90 millimeter gun battery. And there were three of us that set up on these metal tractor seats, and we would look into an oscilloscope, kind of like a TV tube, an oscilloscope. And, as I say, it's not exactly like we were going to have an air raid with Rabaul being not too far away, maybe ten minutes of air time. We

had an air raid every night. It was just how bad it was going to be. So we tracked these bogie planes when they came in. And we had to sit up there and transmit this data to these gun batteries, and we couldn't bail off of that seat until, I mean, till the bombs were dropping. And that wasn't any fun. But, luckily, didn't get hit. Came pretty close, but I didn't get hit. But then, on Peleliu, we set up our radar outfit, our fire control and that is what we did. And popped at few Japanese bombers and fighters. And then after Peleliu, I got to come back to the States. See, I had been overseas about two and a half years. And the thinking was, they didn't tell us, but the thinking was by sending some of the older men back, was to receive more training and then ship you back out for the, well, I was going to say the onslaught, but I mean for the beachhead on the mainland of Japan. That was the thinking. But, of course, with the dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we didn't. Now, some of the guys I knew got on there, after that, but I didn't get to Japan. And I didn't particularly want to go, either.

John: I can understand that.

Richard: I'd been overseas about two and a half years, and three campaigns. I thought, well, Dicky, old boy, you've got enough. So, that is about it.

John: Okay, well what did you do? Did you come back to the States?

Richard: Yeah, I came back to the States, and took some more training in communications. Radio and telephone, and just kind of stayed around. And not too long after, about two or three months later, the war in the Pacific ended, and then I was discharged. Went home. I was discharged on August 20th, 1945.

John: Okay, they dropped the bomb on August 6, because that was my birthday.

Richard: I didn't remember the day.

John: My birthday.

Richard: But I remember, when I was at Camp LeJeune, at the headquarters area, I was walking down one of the streets, and I heard somebody hollering, "Hey! V-J Day! The war is over in the Pacific!" And so, I got rabbit-eared, and I said, "Okay, tell me about it." They told me about it. I wasn't in the building at the time but I found that out. And then, shortly after, oh, I'd say probably a month after that, I was discharged.

John: Great. Now, when you came out, you had the GI Bill, didn't you?

Richard: Yes, I did.

- John: How?
- Richard: I used the GI Bill for a college education. You know, when they mustered you out of the Marine Corps, they always ask you, "Do you want to ship-over for another cruise?"
- John: Yeah, I know.
- Richard: And I said, "No, thank you. I am going to leave the Marines and I want to go to school." I wanted to go to school. I had a high school education but I wanted to go to college to get more training. So that is what I did. I used the GI Bill. The GI Bill is probably the best program that the United States Congress ever enacted. That made more productive, tax-paying citizens than anything ever, ever. That is the finest thing that they ever did.
- John: It helped millions, millions of guys get a good start. Yeah.
- Richard: Yeah. They still have the GI Bill, don't they? In certain ways.
- John: I don't know. I got the Korean GI Bill.
- Richard: I got the original one, but it sure did help a lot of us ex-GIs. And made us really productive people, and helped.
- John: How about vets organizations? The VFW, or the American Legion, or that? Did you join?
- Richard: I am a life member of the VFW. Yes. Have been for years.
- John: What about reunions? Do you ever get together?
- Richard: Yeah. Now, I went last year, and then I had to miss a couple of years. My wife was quite ill, and then she died. Now, this past summer, I went to two Marine Corps reunions. One in Florida, at Tampa, and another one at El Paso. I went to one in Florida. I really wasn't a member of that group but they invited me. So I thought, well, I'll just go.
- John: What outfit were you in?
- Richard: I was in the 12th Defense Battalion.
- John: Okay.

- Richard: And we traveled with the 1st Marine Division. And, you know, in a division, there is a lot of different outfits. Many different types of men, their training and things like that. Tremendous volume of people travel in a division. So, that is who we traveled with, the 12th Defense Battalion.
- John: Okay. Thinking back over it, about it, how do you feel? First of all, it interrupted your life. Pulled you out of it. What is your feeling about having served?
- Richard: You mean, to be disrupted?
- John: No, about having been part of it.
- Richard: Oh, I don't feel that, at all. I'm glad that I did volunteer and go in the Marines. And serve. Our country had a need. And I was still quite young. It really didn't bother me. Actually, and then the GI Bill helped me tremendously to become, as I said, to become a productive citizen.
- John: What course of study did you follow? In college?
- Richard: I was in science, and then I became a science teacher in the Kohokia Public Schools, in Illinois. I lived in Illinois all the time. And then, during the summer, I was sent, I had a science major and taught science, I worked as a park ranger, a naturalist.
- John: Oh, that is what the woman I was with said. Yes.
- Richard: For almost thirty years. In other words, I taught in the classroom during the academic year, and then in the summer time for almost three months, I was just outside in Yellowstone, which is one of the most large natural ecosystems in the lower forty-eight states.
- John: Yeah. Beautiful.
- Richard: Of course, it is not as big as Alaska. Alaska is larger than everything, but I certainly enjoyed being a naturalist in Yellowstone. Had a lot of fun, you know. A lot of enjoyment. And my wife went with me.
- John: Oh, that is good.
- Richard: My wife was a registered volunteer with the Park Service, and she went with me a lot and helped me on different activities, and I sure appreciated that.

John: That's great.

Richard: It was fun. Most of my contacts with people as an interpreter and naturalist were fun. I never had to approach people on a negative attitude, never. And I thoroughly enjoyed that. I wouldn't have wanted to be a law enforcement ranger. In fact, I wouldn't do it. The only time I ever did any law enforcement work in the Park Service was when I was invited, and that was mostly on search and rescue, and occasionally, some criminal will commit something somewhere, and think, well, since I am so close to the Grand Teton, and the Yellowstone, I'll just visit them. And that is the most stupid thing that they can ever do. I mean. They are not trained in back country survival, and things like that. And that's not good. If I was a criminal, I would never visit an area like that. I know back country, but for a person who is not wise to back country, whoo! The survival rate for somebody who doesn't know anything is not too good in a wild environment. And I mean, wild.

John: Oh, yeah, I've been up there. I've seen it. I fished out there a lot. Beautiful country. Oh, it is so beautiful.

Richard: That was one of my main activities when I wasn't working, was fly fishing.

John: Yeah, I love that.

Richard: When I wasn't on duty, I was either, my wife and I, we were either fly fishing, or hiking, or doing something like that. Photography. We did a lot of nature photography, and that is what we did in our time off.

John: Yeah, great. That's good. Okay. I was in the Marine Corps from 1955 to 1963.

Richard: Oh, so you were a Jar Head?

John: Oh, yeah. I did my basic at Parris Island, which is a lovely, lovely place to visit.

Richard: Good old P. I. I'm glad I never got there.

John: I enjoyed the service. I'm glad I'm out. But I enjoyed it. In fact, just this past year, five of us who served together, back then, fifty years ago, have gotten in touch with each other. We're sending Christmas cards and birthday cards, and that. It's kind of nice.

Richard: I go to reunions every year. Well, not every year, but I plan on going this year.

John: Yeah. Where will it be this year?

- Richard: This year, ours will be in Missouri, at, what is this place south of St. Louis? It's just, well, that is where it is going to be in Missouri.
- John: Brampton?
- Richard: Yeah. This year ours is going to be at Brampton. So, that will be pretty interesting. A lot of shows and a lot of things to do in Brampton. I've been there several times. But, that is where it is going to be. Now, this past year, we were down in El Paso, Texas.
- John: Yeah, that is way down.
- Richard: And, you know, I was really surprised in that country. There is a lot more of El Paso than I ever thought there would be.
- John: I've never been there.
- Richard: And it's not really too far from the Rio Grande River, and Mexico. It's only about a mile.

[End of Side A of Tape 1.]

- John: Okay. Anything else you want to put on the record about your time in the service?
- Richard: Well, not really. I mean, as I said before, that is what I did. I was a tank driver, in a tank crew. And then after that, I went into communications and I was a radar fire control operator and then I just stayed in communications after that. So, really, that is about it. I didn't really do any particular outstanding job. I was just one of the regular Jar Heads.
- John: You were there, though.
- Richard: Did the work, and things like that.
- John: I have a very good friend who just passed away, Stephen Ambrose, the author. And I was with him and a bunch of World War II vets. And Ambrose said, a lot of the guys were saying, "I didn't do much." And Ambrose said, "You were giants! Because you went out and saved the world." And you did.
- Richard: Well, I thought I didn't do much. But, I guess, all of us, with all of our efforts combined, what we did was really quite a lot. But it didn't seem that much at the time. Oh, yeah, we had contact with the enemy, every once in a while. Not only

from the air, but quite often, there would be a patrol of Japanese, you know, would break through the lines somewhere. And then we all would go after them, and get rid of that problem. Because they would infiltrate, and things like that. And that kind of disrupted things.

John: I can imagine. Well, okay, this is a remarkable story.

Richard: What?

John: I say, it's a remarkable story.

Richard: Oh, I don't think I really, well, as I said, I was just a typical Jar Head. People will have to excuse me for saying that, because we used to kid each other, you know. Things like that. But you put all these combined efforts, and that is why the United States won the Second World War, and the rest of them didn't stand a chance. It was tough, but I was young, see, and my life wasn't disrupted that much. Oh, sure, it was disrupted, but being a young kid just out of high school, I didn't have any set pattern, or employment, or anything like that. As I said, the GI Bill for education was the finest program the United States Congress ever did. And I hope they just keep that up. It made a lot of taxpayers.

John: Yeah. Yeah. And, also, then the housing part of it, where you could get help with a mortgage, that got a lot of houses built after the war, and got a lot of industry going for that. Yeah, it was a great thing. Okay, I am going to wrap up, when I get back to Madison, it will take a week or so, but I'll type this up, and I'll send you a copy of it, okay. And that will be yours to keep.

Richard: I don't think my life in the Marines was anything outstanding. Not really. I was just doing a job, and we all worked together, and we got this done.

John: That's what did it. Yeah.

Richard: Yeah, out there in the Pacific, the Japanese greatly underestimated us. They thought we were weak and things like that. And that was a mistake on their part. We weren't weak at all.

John: Okay, I'll wrap up and I thank you very much for the interview.

Richard: You're welcome.

[End of Interview.]