

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
KENNETH GROENKE
Communications, Marine Corps, World War II

2014

OH
1909

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1909 Groenke, Kenneth, (b. 1926). Oral History Interview, 2014.

User: 1 digital sound recording (ca. 101 min.); mp3 format

Master: 1 digital sound recording (ca. 101 min.); wav format

Abstract:

Kenneth Groenke, a Racine, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service as a Marine Corps communications specialist. He details riding on a troop train to California where he sees the parade ground for the first time. Groenke describes training exercises and military discipline. After basic training, he mentions “telephone school,” liberty, and friendly rivalry with other branches of the service. Groenke discusses the realities of living on a troop ship to Saipan (Mariana Islands), including sea sickness and small spaces. He also explains his unit’s role in the invasion of Okinawa (Japan), during which he survives a kamikaze attack. Special mention is made of his reaction to the flag raising on Iwo Jima. Groenke details his duties as a “telephone guy,” including dangerous tasks and injuries sustained by himself or others. In a portion of the interview, he gives an eye witness description of the aftermath of the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki (Japan).

Biographical Sketch:

Kenneth Groenke (b. 1926) served with the US Marine Corps during World War II from 1943-1946. He was involved in the invasion of Okinawa (Japan) and the occupation of Nagasaki after the atomic bomb was dropped.

Interviewed by Ellen Brooks, 2014.

Transcription by Connie Kottwitz, 2014.

Transcription reviewed by Rebecca Cook, 2015.

Abstract written by Rebecca Cook, 2015.

Interview Transcript

Brooks: Today is April 22, 2014. This is an interview with Kenneth Groenke. Can I call you Ken?

Groenke: Yes.

Brooks: Okay. Ken, who served with the U. S. Marines during World War II. This interview is being conducted in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin. And the interviewer is Ellen Brooks. So, Ken, can you just tell me when and where you grew up?

Groenke: I grew up in ah, Racine, Wisconsin. I was born in January 30, 1926 and that's where I was ah, heh heh, and I grew up there. I went to school there and do you want me to continue?

Brooks: Yeah, tell me a little bit about Racine and what you were --

Groenke: Okay, well, ah, Racine was a town of fifty thousand when I, when I went and I went to Frak School, and that's an elementary school; McKinley Junior High School, then Washington Park High School. And I, ah, I participated in sports; I was on the football team, track team and ah, did very well. [laughter]

Brooks: Okay, and what kind of kid were you besides ah, into sports? Did you like school?

Groenke: Oh, I-I liked school. Well, I was, I don't mean to brag, but I was on the honor roll, President of the Student Council. And, so, you know, I liked school. [chuckling]

Brooks: And what did your parents do?

Groenke: Ah, my dad was manager of an A & P Store. He managed the first A & P Super Store in Racine, Wisconsin on State Street. And prior to that he had, you know, just one of the little stores where you have to take kind of a hook to get the oatmeal off the shelves and things like that. But, my mother was just a homemaker.

Brooks: Brothers and sisters?

Groenke: I have two brothers and one sister. And my one brother--I'm the eldest and my, ah, my brother, Glen, is two years younger and ah, he participated in track also. He went to -- he graduated from the University of Wisconsin and he got his Doctorate in Education and then they moved--he and his wife moved to Arizona. And ah, was a professor at a junior

college there. Ah, and my other brother, younger, he's -- I'm six years older than he is--he also was in education and he went to the University of Wisconsin and ah, a Lutheran College also. And he taught grade school, and he would, later on, move to Arizona and he taught schools there. My ah, my ah, youngest, the youngest was my sister, and I was twelve years older than she was and, ah, she, well, she was very, very intelligent and ah did different types of jobs and ah, was very good. And she got married and lived in Arizona, too.

Brooks: Oh, wow!

Groenke: So, I was the only one that ah didn't live in Arizona, but my wife and I, ah, bought a home, or had one built on a golf course in Arizona, and went there in winters -- or every winter. So--

Brooks: Nice.

Groenke: So, it was nice. That was after I retired, you know. So --

Brooks: That's a nice little set-up.

Groenke: Yeah, it was a great set up. I loved it.

Brooks: Great. So do you remember ah, when you heard about the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

Groenke: Ah, yes. I know exactly when it was. I was, obviously, a Sunday, and we were at my aunt's house, and ah, that's my mother's sister. And they, the sisters ah, my aunts and my mother would have dinners, you know, for the family all the time. Different times. And I was, just before we ate, ah, we were seated around, ah a Philco, I think, Philco big radio. And a floor standing radio, and it had a wire recorder in it. And that was, you know, a super big deal. But, we were around there and when we heard that ah, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. And we were all taken back because ah, this, that's when we heard it.

Brooks: Yeah.

Groenke: Before lunch.

Brooks: Specifically, what was your reaction? What were your feelings?

Groenke: Well, you know, I was only, that was, I think I was sixteen, or something. Well, I was, you know, kind of amazed. Ah, and just surprised, but I wasn't really into politics at that point. So, ah, it was very interesting, though, to hear that, you know. And then, President Roosevelt's talk, you

know and figuring there would be a, you know, big war and so, and there was. And that was [chuckling]--

Brooks: Did you immediately think you would enlist or be drafted? Did you think it would affect you at all?

Groenke: No, I was too young, of course, to be drafted. And it was ah, they were maybe starting it at about that time, you know the draft. But, I still was only a junior in high school, I think. And, ah, I had, you know, I didn't think about enlisting, and that, but when I was a senior, so many of the guys enlisted. And ah, and I enlisted in December and I, when I was a senior, and the graduating class was January. So, ah, yeah, a lot of my buddies enlisted. Everything, everything, you know, they were all anxious to get in.

Brooks: Um, hmm. So you enlisted in December of '42 or '43?

Groenke: '43.

Brooks: '43.

Groenke: Yeah.

Brooks: So, I ah, I know that you originally were wanting to go into the Air Force. Is that correct?

Groenke: Yes, absolutely! I had, as a kid, I made all these balsam airplanes, you know, with little sticks of balsams, and fixed them all. I had them hanging all in the ceiling in my bedroom, and oh, I took aeronautics instead of--I can't,-- in high school, in senior class, you could take a class called "Aeronautics". And so, you know I took that. I passed the V5, the V12, and all of that, and ah, and then I hitch-hiked to Milwaukee, this was when I was seventeen. 'Cause I ah, I couldn't get a car, or my dad was using it or something. And so, anyway, I --hitch-hiking was done a lot, I think, at that time. So I hitch-hiked to General Billy Mitchell Field, and it wasn't like it is now, it was just a, you know, a real small thing. And ah, I wanted to take the test for ah, to be a pilot. And so, this Sergeant came in with a manila folder, and in the manila folder he reached in and pulled out a hank of yarn, and this was red, red yarn, you know. And he said, "Now I'm gonna pull out other hanks of yarn and I want you to tell me, you know, if they're the same or if they are relatively the same." Well, you know, you know he pulled out, well anyway, evidently, he pulled, --I know it was red, and I can tell red, and I can tell,-- but this was a very close to red.

And, you know, and I said, "Well, you know" thinking that was the answer. And he, then he pulls out the red one, and says, "See! They're not

the same! They're not the same." Well, I failed the test! [chuckling] and I couldn't be a pilot. So, then ah, later on, I if you want me to get ahead of the story, in ah, in high school, and I'm a senior there. And my buddy called me on the phone, and he said, "Ken, where are ya'?" And I said, "I'm at home, Irv." His name was, ah, Irv Christensen. And he said, "Well, you were going to meet me at the Marine recruiting station." And I said, "I never said that, Irv!" And he said, "Oh, yes you did. Come on down here, now." And I said, "Well, okay, Irv. I'll come down, and I'll see what the sergeant has to say." And ah, the sergeant talked to me and Irv, wanted to enlist and ah, I said, "I want to be a pilot." And the sergeant said, "Well, wouldn't you rather be a Marine pilot?" Oh! [laughter] Well, that was the answer, you know! And ah, sure, I'd rather be a Marine pilot! So anyway, I signed up. Irv signed up. And then after Boot Camp, there wasn't anything open for pilots in the Marine Corps. [chuckling]

Brooks: Wow.

Groenke: -- at that time. And so --

Brooks: So, the recruiter was just saying what you wanted to hear.

Groenke: Yeah! Well, that's right! You know, that was, that was my main goal. I even, at that time, they had these ah, oh, little booklet with all the little circles in it in different colors, you know for ah color-blindness. And I tried to memorize all of them, just so I could pass! But, ah, I couldn't remember them all, and anyway, I-I couldn't get in. So.

Brooks: So, you enlisted with Irv?

Groenke: Yes.

Brooks: Did you enlist with anybody else that you knew?

Groenke: Oh, yeah! There's about ten of us from class enlisted the same time. And there's a picture in the Racine Journal at that time. Ah, all of these fellas being shown a Ju-Jitsu move by a Marine, you know, back from the service and working with the recruiting office. But, so that's it. Yeah, a bunch of us guys.

Brooks: Okay, so then were you excited about the Marines? Did you know anything about the Marines before you went in?

Groenke: Well, I-I knew they were the toughest, the biggest, the strongest [laughter] creed. You know, and ah and that's naturally a kid, you know, seventeen and that would want the, you know, would want the best. And that's not

saying anything against the soldiers, or the Navy. My son was in the Navy. But ah, but it, anyway, at that time, yeah I, you know, gung ho!

Brooks: So you were seventeen. Did you have to get your parent's permission?

Groenke: Yes. Yeah.

Brooks: And how did that go?

Groenke: Oh, not bad. Because, see, I was almost eighteen. I was eighteen in January. And so, ah, you know, ah, no, no problem. Ah, and if I, if I didn't enlist, I would have got drafted, anyways. Some time, some place along the line. So.

Brooks: So, were they worried? Sad? Proud? Your parents.

Groenke: Were they at the Prom?

Brooks: No, were they worried, or sad, or proud?

Groenke: Oh, I-I really, I really don't know. I imagine they, they were worried at that point. And, ah, lot of people thought maybe the war would be over real fast. That, you know, so. And I don't know if they were proud. You know, I love my parents, but, ah in all the football games and all the track meets that I was in, they never once attended any of them. So. [laughter] But you know, there's just, they just didn't do it.

Brooks: Yeah, yeah. Hmm. So, so then what was next after you enlisted? You enlisted in '43?

Groenke: Yes.

Brooks: December.

Groenke: Yeah, December of '43. And in January, ah of '44, then I got the call to ah, you know, to active duty. And so then, ah, they told me ah, to go to a train station, you know, set, set me all up. So that I could ah, could leave for California. And so, that was that.

Brooks: Wow. So, what did you think about California? Had you ever been outside of the state, or?

Groenke: Yeah, well I was outside the state ah, when I was four-fourteen or fifteen. My ah, parents drove down, my parents and my brothers and my sister drove down to a Temp-to ah, ah, well a city in Florida, not Tempe. Well, anyway, Tampa! Tampa, Florida. They had my mother's relatives who

were there. And so, just for a visit and so that was as far as I ever went, you know.

Brooks: So what was the train like down there? What was that trip like?

Groenke: To Florida--to California?

Brooks: To California, yeah.

Groenke: Oh, I'll tell ya, it was ah, it was a long haul. [throat clearing] Trains, well we had to stop almost every city to get more, more ah, soldiers and Marines on, you know, that were going to California. And so, ah, it was it took at least a couple of days to get there. And then, at every station there would be ah, USO or Red Cross ladies, you know, with coffee and donuts and all. [chuckling] It was, it was nice, you know. That's the first, I first learned how to shuffle cards properly on a train, 'cause we were playing poker. [chuckling] And, I always shuffled over hand, and this was a riffled shuffle. And so, I got a, you know, good at that.

Brooks: So, where, where did you do your basic training, then?

Groenke: In, in Marine, excuse me, Marine Corp Depot, in San Diego. At Camp Pendleton, it's called. And that's, that, there's only two big Marine Depots; one on the east coast and, and ah, San Diego. So ah, it was huge, big, big parade ground and ah, its, its just amazing. Thousands of guys marching, and training, and what-have-you. It was a big deal.

Brooks: Um, hm. Was that, what were your other first impressions of it?

Groenke: Well, ah, it was, it was kind of exciting, at first. You got off, you got off the bus. Yeah, the train, and the bus to the depot, and then marched to these barracks. And there were like sixty men on a bus, or sixty men in each barracks, that's what it was. That's a platoon. And, ah, we had three drill instructors there and the drill instructor drew a line on the floor in back--in front of his desk, a chalk line. And in no uncertain terms told us, we are not step--shouldn't step over the line because we stunk so much! [chuckling] And, I didn't think too much of his [laughter], his friendliness at the time. But then, after while, it was decided by him, that ah, he couldn't stand us anymore, so we all -- sixty guys had to jump in this gang shower, this huge shower, at one time. And I couldn't, I was in the middle, I don't think I even got wet! But, ah, you know, that was to appease him. [laughter] But, you know, they wanted to show who was boss right off the bat, and they were able to do that.

Brooks: Yeah. Was it tough, like all the physical training, and everything?

Groenke: Well, no, well, you know, I was in pretty good shape, because I was doing all that training before, anyway. And ah, I mean, it was ah, it was tough because you wouldn't quit for awhile. I mean, you'd have to take buckets of sand and ah, one in each hand and walk to the ocean and then dump the sand and bring some new sand back a mile, you know. And, and all that sort of stuff was, you know, kind of silly, but it was good training, yes. Different things -- you'd ah, ah well, you would do all sorts of all sorts of training: rope climbing in the morning, ah when as we progressed, because I think there were six or eight weeks of boot camp, I can't remember exactly. And then, ah, as you got going, they would have the swimming and it was always like five o'clock in the morning, and even though California is a warm area, in the winter it is cold at five o'clock in the morning. It's cold, and you'd have to climb up these ah, ah, oh, towers, oh not towers, but ah, ah stairs and with a flat top on the top, and they would have maybe six guys standing over this, right at the edge of this ah, tower, and the big swimming pool is right below you, you know. And it was thirty feet down, and the problem, it even looked more than thirty feet because ah now when they dive, if you watch them dive on television, they have ah, ah oh fans blowing the water so you can you, so the divers could see, you know, where the water was. Well, this way, this was not. You could see right at the bottom of the pool, you could hardly see, you know and then you had to stand up, and six in a row, and one guy would say, "Ready, step off! And then you'd have to hold your chin like this, and just step down, and it was so cold [laughter] and you know, then you, you'd, it was kind of, kind of frightening, especially, I could swim, but lot of those guys couldn't swim. It was a little, little hectic for them. Very hectic. But, ah --

Brooks: Did they get lessons, or was it just kind of --?

Groenke: Well, they found out then who couldn't swim, you know, then they would, they would train them and you had to learn how to swim even with a uniform on, your dungarees on. So, you know, because they-the reason for that thirty feet is because, if, if you're on a ship and it's torpedoed or something, you got to jump off the sides. And so, it's a long way down, and so, that was kind of for the training of it. But they trained everything. You had to throw hand grenades, and went through the gas, tear gas, and different types of gasses, you know, and gas masks. They were, we were well trained, very well trained. And then bayonet practice, which you know, which was okay. [laughter] The dummies didn't fight back at you, so it was all right!

Brooks: That's what they're supposed to do, so --[chuckling] So, did you, the guys from Wisconsin, did you stick together, did you branch out and start making new friends?

Groenke: No, in, in, ah, boot camp, yes. Well, we could have been in different, ah, different platoons. And some of them, I could ah, after a while, then I would know where, where some platoons were located, and you know, and then we would, ah, could see each other. But ah, but some of us, ah, like Irv and Bob Christensen, and Bill Saharda (sp?), and a few others, were in the same platoon. And ah, but then, ah Irv got sick and if you're sick for a few days, then they hold you back. And you have to start all over again. And then I missed him. But then I, after ah, I went to ah, I went to ah Communications School. And ah, and Irv ah, was in ah, I think he was in ah, driving, oh, some kind of boats, I can't remember. And, the, his area was ten miles away, you know on the same camp, Camp Pendleton. But, I, we corresponded, and ah, then I met him one time, or I was going to meet him at his gate. And I had to take a bus to the gate, and ah, he wasn't at the gate, so, you know, I wandered around, and this was near, near the water. Of course, everything was near the water. But, ah, they had a, like a carnival there. They had a little carnivals with shooting, and ah things of that. And here at a rifle range, I found Irv. Out of a million guys, he was shooting! [laughter] So we, we had a good time that day.

Brooks: That's great! So did you meet any, did you start making any new bonds? Meet any new characters while you were in basic training?

Groenke: Oh, yeah! Cripes, ah I don't know how, how, if you want to get into these characters! Because, you know, they're from all over the country and ah, and ah, we ah, well, I mentioned ah, I mentioned one before. Ah, his name is Art. Art. What the heck's his last name now? Can't think of it. But, anyway, ah, his father ah, he was from Kentucky. And his dad was a moon-shiner. And he was a kind of a rough, rough guy. And ah, so one day, he was telling us, he and his mother, and his daughter and his sisters were at home, and all of a sudden, the old man was up in the mountains making moon-shine, and ah, revenueurs went by the house. And then they heard shooting, and ah, --Art Fisher, was his name, Art Fisher. But, ah, and then they didn't know if his dad got killed or not. But pretty soon, the revenueurs went, but the dad, then the dad came home. They didn't get him. And so, ah, that just tells you the type of upbringing Art had. [chuckling] But one time, ah, oh, we would go after, after boot camp and after I went to Telephone School, and you know, if you would go -- oh, let me just preface this, they ah, people in Boot Camp, eighty-five percent would go right into ah, combat, you know, that was it. You know, infantry, if you call it. And then, fifteen percent would go to different schools. And so, I don't know how they decided. But anyway, I was one of the fifteen, so I went to Telephone School. And, which was good. Well then, ah, the, ah, like Bob Christensen and Irv and some of the other guys, didn't get to go to school, so they were right in combat, or, you know, right in combat group. And so, they sailed, they sailed for ah, ah, for Saipan during that

summer, and ah, Bob Christensen got a Purple Heart because he was in the big battle there. But ah, but anyway, ah, because ah, I was going to school, you would have weekends off, and so, ah most of the time you had weekends off, so you could go on "Liberty" then. And you could, you could hitch-hike up to Los Angeles, or, or you know, go to San Diego, or where ever. And ah, so I knew a lot of guys and we would go, we would hitch hike or, you couldn't really get on the train, 'cause trains were so back--you have no idea how many service men, you know, millions! There were sixteen million people fighting, you know. And ah, it was just so crowded. Buses were just full, trains, if you got a train, if you were able to get on a train, the guys would be laying in those, ah, luggage carriers, you know, right over the seats. They had just regular [laughter], it was just packed! And so, ah, but then we would go up and I was very fortunate that I could ah, we could ah go to all these different Luxe radio theaters, and the different theaters and you know things like that. And movie studios and ah, ah the ah, what do they call it? Stage Door Canteen, and ah, and see you know like Betty Hutton, and all these different movie stars, you know. And ah, well, I can't remember the name of the guy now [laughing], the movie star, but anyway he was serving us and ah, he was a real, real ah oh cowboy-type star. And ah, and I, and he was serving, he was behind the bar. Then he would come out and he would serve you and he was relatively short, you know. But ah, in the movies he was always tall! [laughing] And we got a kick out of that because ah, you know, either the girl would be standing in a hole, or he'd be standing on a box, you know, during the shoot, during their shoots. But ah, oh it was nice and if we needed money, you could hitch hike up to the ah, the docks. And ah, they needed people because ah, to unload the docks, barrels of oil and so forth and so on. I don't know if you got fifty cents an hour, or what, it wasn't very much because there wasn't ah salaries were very low. But ah, then my buddies and I would do that for a day and, you know, pick up a couple of dollars so we could go someplace. But ah, it was, it was very interesting and it was just all, it's a different world. Really different. Nicer world, I may add, I think. [laughing]

Brooks: So this is, these were all like on your weekends? You had your weekends off usually while you were in school?

Groenke: Well, most, a lot, most of the times you did. Most of the times. But there would be in some weekends, there would be inspections, there'd be this-that or the other thing. But ah, but you were, you were lucky. You had to put in for it, you know. And ah, ah and there was a lot of ah, fighting going on, too, between the services. It was kind of fun, but ah, the guys all had so much energy, you know. And ah, the ah, the Army people, Army soldiers, we would call "Dog Faces", you know and bark at them and they would, you know, call us names. And then maybe had a few --- I won't go into all that, but we were all friends, anyway. [laughing]

Brooks: So it was all in good fun, kind of thing?

Groenke: Yeah, it was! Yeah, it was.

Brooks: And so, were you keeping track of what was happening overseas?

Groenke: Oh constantly!

Brooks: Did you get news?

Groenke: Yes, constantly, yeah. The papers were all full of it, you know. Radios were full of it. And we knew exactly, ah, you know, what was happening. So there wasn't, ah, well, we were told pretty much everything, I think. And then ah, it came time, I think around November, I ah, we were shipping out. You know, I was done with schooling and all that sort of stuff. So ah, we shipped out, and we shipped out from San Francisco. We went from San Diego, I think, up to San Francisco, and then took off for overseas. And this troop ship, and the troop ships, were huge. And just thousands of guys, just thousands. No room to hardly sit down! Top side or anything, and the bunks were ah two metal poles with ah, ah a metal ah pole with ah oh, what was I trying to think of, ah, canvas stretched acrossed it. And then maybe four or five high.

Brooks: Like a hammock, kind of?

Groenke: No, it wasn't a hammock, it was really stiff. See, they had ah, well the two big poles and then they had a circular or oblong metal pipe and then between, and then they had this ah, ah you know canvas, wrapped -- it had holes in the canvas, and they wrapped ah, the ah, through the holes, they put rope and tie that right to the ah, to that ah, you know metal. And so it was stiff, you know, it was hard. So, and then ah, you had, you had maybe three, two and a half, three feet between rows and then the cots, the sleeping arrangements were up four, maybe five high. And so, if you were up on the top, probably four high, you had to step on each, each level to get up there. And so, the first night, the first night, ah, we had, we ran into a, kind of what do you call it, ah hurricane, or I guess a tornado, must have been, kind of a hurricane anyway. And the waves were just bad, and the ship was really rocking all night, you know. Well, you don't get your sea legs that fast. The next morning, oh, it seemed like the whole ship was sick [laughter] and they, you know, there was throwing up over the, out went the chow and the mess men, had to go up, you know, but you couldn't find, get one line. There were areas of the ship would go different times, up, you know, so many decks and cross the ship and down so many decks to get to the chow hall. And then when you got there, geez, the mess men were throwing up in their helmets. [laughter] It was terrible!

Brooks: Oh! Did you get sick?

Groenke: No! I didn't throw up, but oh, almost, what I could, if I could get topside, two things would help me: go topside, and to look at the horizon. The horizon was level, you know, the ship maybe going, but that helped, you know, helped you. Or else, get down on your cot, and just lay there, you know. And that helped. But, ah, after a while, oh! Some guys never, never got over it. That's just the way it is. Some people just don't, but ah, but almost all of us did, you know. And then, ah, then you'd - we'd send a guy up to find a place on top, on topside on the deck, and he would ah make a little circle there, and ah, ah and so we, so then the rest of us, maybe five or six guys that I knew real well, we would go up there and play cards. So, then you could ah, you'd have a little place to do it, you know to play. Otherwise, you could hardly, really, it's hard, it's hard to believe, it's so crowded! It was just so crowded, and ah, but, but anyway, then ah, I don't know if you want to hear the story, but ah, you interrupt me if I'm talking too much, but

Brooks: No!

Groenke: But, we got out of San Francisco and we were told, we were going to Saipan. Well, Saipan was a long way away, but before we go to Saipan, we had to go to Eniwetok, an island called Perry Island, in Eniwetok and wait for a convoy, because you know, the Japanese, subs and all that were around. And ah, they would always want to travel by convoy. And so, we got there, it was just a few degrees north of the equator. And ah, so hot! And the metal decks on the ship were just so hot, you had your big boondockers, we called it, big heavy boots, you know and the heat would go right through it. But the Captain, evidentially, of the ship, you know took pity on us, and ah, he lowered the, he said, "we're all going to go swimming!" So he lowered the gang plank, --gang planks, you hand a couple of them-- and then threw out these big huge rubber rafts, I mean that would hold twenty or thirty people, you know, and had them thrown over the side. And then, ah we all could ah go swimming. So, so, gee, that was great! I got down and into the water and it was just so refreshing, 'cause it was, you know, just a hundred and twenty degrees, you know whatever it was. And ah, and then the water was so nice, and I was a good swimmer then, and ah I just started swimming away, you know, just really happy. And then, I got a ways away, and then I thought, "Where's the ship?" you know. I was down in a trough and ah, and I couldn't see the ship! And that concerned me a little. And, but then I got up on the top of the trough, then I could see the ship. But the current, was, was pulling me away, was pulling me out. See we weren't docked close to the ah, well, we were close to the island, but maybe half a mile out or something like that. And, boy, I turned around, and I really swam hard, and I, 'til I got to,

'til I got to the rafts. And then, ah, another thing that tickles me now, we had, there were a lot of Marines on the fantail, that's the back of the ship, with rifles. And they were shooting at sharks and ah, but they, they said, "Oh, you don't have to worry. These are just sand sharks. They won't hurt you." But they were still shooting at them to keep them away. [Laughter]

Brooks: Yeah! Did you know there were sharks in there before you went in?

Groenke: No. No. No. But then I swam back. I saw them shooting at, at, I figured they weren't shooting at Marines! [laughter] So, it must have been something! But that was, that was interesting. And then we ah, oh then we were still waiting for the ah, for the convoy, and then the Captain of the ship said, "Okay, we're going to have a beer bust!" And ah, on the ah Perry Island. So they took the Higgins Boats, the whole ship went, and ah, they had boards set across on, whatever, planks, or something, with all bottles of beer, cases of beer on it. And the island was Eniwetok, was an island that was fought over prior to us getting there. And the trees were all leveled, all the palm trees, just stumps, you know. And ah, we got, got on the beach, and proceeded to you know, drink all this beer, which was nice. And ah, like I mentioned before, the Marines were always pretty good with the beer. [laughter] But you, they have to keep the guys happy, you know, you just can't, you gotta--So anyway, then ah, the convoy showed up and then we went to stop just briefly at Guam and then north was Saipan. And, ah, before we hit Saipan, Tinian was just only a half a mile south of Saipan. And ah, the battle, the battle was done. When I got there it was just a mop up. Ah, they were maybe one or two thousand Japanese left on the island, hiding in caves. And they were just ah, you know, just shooting, well, the General, they had killed six Marines just a few days before and ah, the General said, "We're going to have to get rid of them." It was just a mop up. And ah, I know one of my jobs was in communications and I was a telephone guy, and ah, we had laid lines through a, through a sugar cane field. And sugar cane, if you ever saw it growing, is just so thick and you can't see your hand in front of your face, it's that thick. And, but I, you know, I was following the line that we had laid because somebody had cut it. Well, it would have had to been the Japanese, you know. And ah, and I'll tell you, I don't know, I didn't know, you know if I'd make it out of that sugar cane field, but because you couldn't see where the guy's hiding! You know, or if he's hiding, or what have you. But anyway, I found it and repaired it, you know, got out of there then. So I was happy about that!

Brooks: How did you get picked for that assignment? Just luck?

Groenke: Oh, I don't know, I, I, I just, I just got see, later on I was a Wire Chief. But that was in Japan. But ah, but anyway, I think the Wire Chief at that

time, probably didn't like me. [laughter] And so, maybe that's why he picked me, I don't know.

Brooks: So the Wire Chief is the guy kind of like in charge of the telephone?

Groenke: Well, he, yeah, he's not the Lieutenant or anything like that, but he's in charge of the section. So, you know, and ah, ah so his name was Chief Waukau, he was an Indian from Wisconsin. And ah, and we, the ah, one time, we had to ah - oh for recreation, we had a Lieutenant at that time and ah, and they wanted ah, to do different things, you know. We had boxing gloves and the Lieutenant said, "Ken, I want you to fight the Chief." And so, so, you know, we each had our boxing gloves on there, and anyway, ah, I got the worst of it. He hit me in the nose and my nose started bleeding and then the ah, Lieutenant said, "Aw, that's enough!" You know, it wasn't really a grudge fight, but ah, it you know, he didn't want to you know, your just so glad to have won. But ah, but anyway, I didn't and so, ah so, that's that's okay. And then, I don't know, you tell me if you want me to stop talking

Brooks: Well, I have a question, on the, I know that in the Navy they had a lot of different rituals and things they do like when you cross the equator and different things like that. Did you have that in the Marines, did you do anything like that?

Groenke: Oh, yeah! Yes, they had the same thing, they had the same thing. But I didn't cross the equator, I crossed the Date Line. We were just north of the equator, but then they, there's a whole rig-a-marole if we'd a gone, I had papers they had given out aboard ship, you know, what, what you do, well, when you do that.

Brooks: So did you have to do anything for crossing the Date Line?

Groenke: Ah.

Brooks: Was there like a hazing ritual or anything?

Groenke: No, no. I don't, I don't recall if, if we did.

Brooks: And what were you supposed to do if you crossed the equator?

Groenke: Well.

Brooks: So, they gave you like a paper said, "This is what--"

Groenke: Right, right, right! That's right. There was a, there was a paper and I've seen it. And maybe they even gave it to me ahead of time because they

didn't know if we were going to go across or something. But ah, yeah, I remember it had scrolls on it and things like that. It was kind of nice.

Brooks: Do you remember what it said?

Groenke: What's that?

Brooks: Do you remember what it said?

Groenke: No, no. Not at all. I didn't remember. Ah, and you know, it was, it was kind of interesting. It was nice, but it wasn't something that ah, well a lot, well you know you're obviously aware of it, but ah, but that was it.

Brooks: So the ship that you took from um, from Perry Island to Saipan, do you remember the name of that ship?

Groenke: No. Ah, I don't. I-I have it, in these letters, you know, the one hundred letters, I must have put that name of the ship at some point, anyway, but ah. Oh! It wasn't too important, but there was ah something that just came up about it and ah I was told that was the ship we were on. [laughter] So, so I don't remember it.

Brooks: Yeah, that's okay. I'm sure we can find out, too. So, but on that convoy, were you guys in danger, did you encounter torpedoes? Was it a pretty safe crossing to Saipan?

Groenke: Well, you know, with a convoy, you had ah, destroyers and all the other transports, you know. And ah, destroyers were outside, and ah, but there wasn't any, we didn't get torpedoed or nothing like that. So, but ah, it was ah, completely dark at night. You couldn't light a match on topside. You know, everything had to be completely dark, so ah you know nobody could see you. It was just like in California and ah, any of the coast cities, you know, there was ah you had lights out and they couldn't have any lights on. Anytime. But ah, it ah, it worked out. And then, let's see, after ah, okay, then, then we got to Saipan. And ah, oh trained all the time. And then, then ah we were told we were going to invade Okinawa. Okay, that was good. And then so we, I remember this pretty well. We got on board ship and then we sat in the harbor for over a week, or two weeks because it was quite a, quite a task to get all, for an invasion, you would have ships for tanks and all, all the gear and everything. You know, they all had to be loaded first. Well, they loaded the Marines first, you know, which is easy, they just get on. But then they had all the other stuff and had to get all the other ships had to get loaded. Then they get out in the harbor, and then more ships get loaded, they get out in the harbor. And you know, there are hundreds of ships. And so, finally, we got ah we took off, you know. And one of the things that I remember as we were going to

Okinawa, we passed ah, ah Iwo Jima. Now, we were maybe fifty miles, or a hundred miles from Iwo, you couldn't see it, but ah, this is when the battle was going on in March. And ah, they had a loud speaker system, and they had it hooked up to an announcer or somebody telling them about the battle at Iwo. And ah, and then they said, and they were telling it, and it was all over the ship and you could hear it, and then the flag was raised at Iwo. I still get emotional about that, but ah, then we all applauded! You know [voice is breaking with emotion] and it was, it was really exciting, you know. That was a big flag raising. And then ah, then we got to Okinawa. And now, we were ah, this was Easter Sunday, 1945. And I'll never forget it. And ah, we were going to land, well, just that Saturday, the Saturday before Easter Sunday, we were all laying in our cots and bunks, you know and ah, still asleep at about five-thirty in the morning a tremendous racket! You know, guns going off, bombs dropping, just you know. Ack, ack, ack! Airplanes zooming around and all this stuff! And we were of course below the water line, maybe I was you know in a hole with about five other guys or something like that. And we knew that, you know, that we were being bombed! But I didn't know much about it at that time. And ah, but I remember looking around and I said a prayer. I hope they don't hit this ship, you know, because if they do, I'm gone. Because they hadn't, they had closed the hatches 'cause they didn't want hundreds of Marines running up topside interfering with the Navy. And ah, ah, and you know, you were way below the water line. There's no way you could get out. But fortunately, we didn't get, we didn't get hit. A number of ships did and they were sunk, but ah, then we got top -- then we went after they were all shot down, the kamikazes, ah 'cause that was a one-way trip for them, either they got shot down, or they crashed in the ocean. And ah, then went topside, and they had church services on the fantail. They had ah, they had Protestant and Jewish and Catholic church services, you know. And separated, but they were there, and that's when we heard, and we have, I have a sheet, too, which is interesting that my mother had kept, 'cause I had sent it to them ah, saying that ah, you know, you are about to-- it's a letter from the Captain, saying you are about to enter, you know, combat now, and so forth and so on. But ah, but then we heard about the, and the Kamikaze and that's "Divine Wind". That's what Kamikaze means, "Divine Wind", in Japanese. And ah, so then we, after the church services, they threw these cargo nets over the side of the ship and then we climbed, climbed down. And we had packs on our backs, and I carried a carbine and ah, climbed down those, those ah, that netting. And that's not as easy as you think, because you think, "Well, shoot! I can climb down that netting." But the big ship was relatively stationary. The little Higgins boats were going up and down like this. And you're climbing down and you look down and oh, the boat is, the Higgins boat is right there. I can let go, well, about that time the wave went down and you dropped ten feet or so, you know. But, anyway, we made it. And so ah, then there were, there were hundreds and hundreds of Higgins boats, I

mean hundreds, because all the, all the ships there had them, you know, all the transports had them. And ah, we sailed around for at least two hours, out about five miles or something like that. And ah, I, and I thought, "Well geez, now we're going to land!" Right, you know, that's the object of this whole thing. But then the-the Higgins boats all went back to the ship. And what's going on, you know? And we had to climb up that netting again and then we were told that this was just a feint because ah, the ah, the 8th Marine Division and the Army had ah, had invaded the island in the middle, the middle of ah Okinawa. And see, Naha, that's where we were going, was on the southern part. And so, that crew, all these Japanese soldiers to the south, which, which enabled us to land unopposed. We landed unopposed there. And so that was wonderful! And so, ah then the next day, the same thing! We had to go down [chuckling] sail around for two hours in the Higgins boats, and then again came back to the ship!

Brooks: So, they didn't tell you that--

Groenke: No! No!

Brooks: --either time that this was real or--

Groenke: No. [chuckling]

Brooks: --a decoy?

Groenke: No, I was a peon, you know [laughing]. Maybe, I know, maybe the big officers knew but no one else did. And ah, then got back on board ship. Then we were told that ah, now, ah with the invasion was working good in the center. We were then told we were going to be in reserve. And so, then Kamikazes started coming back again. And so, ah the top brass figured we better get these ships out of here that were in reserve because they sink. Kamikazes sinks one ship and a thousand guys are dead, you know. So that didn't make sense. So, so we sailed, or steamed back to ah Saipan. And then, then we were starting to train for the invasion of Japan, okay. And that's when ah, people from ah Hollywood came and had their shows ah, ah Donald O'Connor - you don't even know who he is--

Brooks: I know who he is!

Groenke: [laughing] Well, okay. He was there. And ah, I didn't see him because I was on the wrong side of the island. But ah, but anyway, that was nice. And so they-they had that entertainment.

Brooks: So what did a telephone guy to train? Do you do different things than the rest of the Marines, or--?

Groenke: Oh, yeah! Yeah, well you know, you, you had to, you had to know combat. You had to do all that stuff 'cause you had to -- now I didn't have an M1, ah radiomen, telephone men had a carbine. It's a little lighter, but still 30 caliber. But ah, you had to ah, you know, all the different companies and platoons and all over. Ah, you had to lay lines, lay wire to, you know, to these different areas and so this wire was on a big roll and ah, you get two guys, it weighed about, I don't know, eighty pounds or something like that. And each holding one side on the handle, and then you'd run, and unreel the wire, you see. And then you had to learn how to hook up switchboards because ah, you know, you just couldn't lay a line to each one, you had to, you had to come to a switch board and then you'd label the switchboard, you know; Company B, Company A, blah, blah, blah. And so then, ah whoever was at ah, wanted to call, you know, would pick up the phone and ah, they had little field telephones, you'd ring them like this and ah, then that would flip down a little arm on the switchboard. And then the guy, the switchboard operator, which is one of us, you know, ah would say, "Yeah, you know, whatever, this is, whatever the code was." And they'd say, "I want to talk to Colonel "Something", or other. And then you'd, you'd take this little cord, you seen how those cords are, you push them in, and ah, do all that. And then you had to learn how to ah, all the different splices, and different type of hook-ups, you know, which was interesting. And that, and that, by that time, I was ah I was ah- ah Wire Chief. And ah, only so many officers could get a phone, 'cause everybody wanted a phone, you know, all the officers. Well, you didn't give to Lieutenants, you'd give to ah, but they would request it. But then we knew who we could give it to, 'cause you only had so many - twelve, twelve flopper, or a twenty-four, you know flopper, I think. And ah, I remember one time, ah, the Head Cook wanted- wanted a telephone. And I said, I kind of knew him in a way, I said, "Well, what do we get if we give you a phone?" And he said, "Well, what do you want?" Well, so then we negotiated, I negotiated with him. Well, I wanted Spam, if Spam came in five pound packets, like that and and big, fresh baked bread. And then, I'll get you a phone. [laughing] So, so he got that, some of the Officers didn't get it, but ah [laughing]. But ah, that was fun. We could, we could, you know do things like that. And that wasn't hurting anybody but ah, ah, but I knew we had enough ah, enough, I can't remember what those little things were called, that flopped down. But ah, we had enough of them, anyway.

Brooks: To spare for the cook?

Groenke: Yeah.

Brooks: Did you, was this the cook on board the ship?

Groenke: No. No, this was on Saipan.

Brooks: Okay.

Groenke: So, no on board ship, we didn't do any of that stuff. You didn't, you know, you, on these troop ships, you didn't really train, it was too crowded, you know. They had maybe exercise groups, or something like that, but that was it. And then, ah, now we're getting, more or less, to the end. Now, ah the bomb landed, okay, the atomic bomb.

Brooks: You were back in Saipan, right?

Groenke: In Saipan, yeah. See, now we're, now we're practicing where we're going to invade. And we knew, we had the maps all laid out, in front of us. We were going to Nagasaki. And ah, that's the southern most city in Oahu, no, Kyosho, Kyosho is the southern one. And ah, so anyway, ah then ah, I was, oh, when I heard --I had the night watch, and would sleep up by the switchboard. And, ah I got a call, I think it was from London or someplace like that, I just don't know. And, it said that a bomb had dropped, you know, an atomic bomb. And ah, gee that word got around and you know, and we figured, "Boy, the end of the war!" and that, ah, but it wasn't the end of the war. Then, that was a Nagasaki, or yeah, and then, Hiroshima, Hiroshima was the first one. And ah, but they didn't surrender. And the reason they didn't surrender was because ah, Truman wanted to punish the Emperor more, and wouldn't give them--they called them "points". So many points that were in negotiation. And Truman said no. And so finally, ah, you know, it was a long story and I won't go into it. But anyway, they let, let Hiroshima, or Hiroshima, or [chuckling] the Emperor, I can't think of his name, let him, you know, live and so forth. And, ah so that was good. And then, but it still wasn't the end of the war, right then. In the interim, I was, when I heard about the end of the war, ah I was marching with a whole string of Marines through a ah, through a tent, a corpsman's tent. And getting ready to invade Japan. And we were getting shots in both arms, as you walked through, you know. They were shooting you in the arm. And then we were outside that tent, and everybody was cheering and screaming, "The War is over! The War is over!" And so that's how I heard that, you know.

Brooks: Were the shots, you were getting, were those to prepare you for invasion, or to prepare you for going home?

Groenke: No, no, for invasion, so see --

Brooks: Hmm, so it was still on?

Groenke:

Oh yeah, yeah. Because you had typhus and all the different shots that they give. And ah, so then, then we knew you know, that the war is over. And the next thing, ah, that we ah, were training and knowing where we were going to land. Okay. And as a consequence, you know, we took off and it was only like maybe three weeks after the bomb had hit, that we landed in Nagasaki. We were the first troops to land in Nagasaki, Japan. And ah, that was kind of exciting, too, because ah, ah, you know, Nagasaki was really demolished. But there are seven, excuse me, seven hills around the city. And the bomb landed over the flat area, which was a Mitsubishi aircraft factory. And ah, and it really kind of, I mean, it did demolish it. But it saved a lot of the city, because the heat waves and the wind and so forth, from the bomb, hit those hills and then ah shot upward. So, but the city, a lot of people were all burned. I mean, you know, you could see, you could see it. And ah, which was really sad, and ah I remember we marched -- got off, got off the ship, the first thing I saw was a dead Japanese floating--I was on the starboard side of the boat, ship and floating, you know in the water. And then, we landed, we marched ah to ah inland to ah a little, little parochial, or not parochial, a little Japanese school. And ah, and that's where we slept that first night. And ah as we marched there, on these just little dirt roads, you know, nothing. And, all the little Japanese people, a lot of them, the brave ones were standing on the sides. Little kids, they were so neat, you know, they would be running around, you know, the kids were, they were happy. Nice kids. And ah, then we got there, and then marched from there to downtown Nagasaki, and we were billeted in I thought it was a, like the courthouse, or it was a big, it was a big building, but I don't know if it was a commercial building or not. But it was three or four stories high. And then ah, that's where, that's where we were. We stayed there, you know. So, and then we went at first you couldn't get, you couldn't get to the bombed out area because they were all concerned, you know, with that. But after a week or so ah, we-- we would sneak, [Intermittent tape issues] the sentries would be ah on the back of the building. But ah, in the evening, you know we weren't supposed to do that, but a number of, it wasn't just me, but a number of us guys we would ah, wait until the sentry got to the other side, and then we'd sneak, sneak through. And you know, you could see that, we'd go downtown and we'd talk to the Japanese, you couldn't hardly talk to them because they didn't speak English. [End of issue] But one time, then this was a few weeks later, we could go, legally, you know, into town. I was walking down this little dirt street, and ah, all of a sudden I heard a voice from a little old woman, "Hi there Marine!" She said. What is this? And ah, this little, little lady was there. And she's only about five feet tall and ah, and then I walked over and introduced myself to her, she, and it turned out she was the last friend of the Queen of the Hawaiian Islands. And she was an actress, and her parents lived in ah, in Japan. And she came over, but that was when the war broke out, and she couldn't get back. And so, geez, we had a lot of nice visits. I would ah, I would bring aspirin tablets

to her because they couldn't get anything like that. And ah, *Life* magazines, and you know, things like that. And then she had a niece, too. Her niece, niece was ah, Yuki, ah no, her name was Yuki Ioko. (sp?), Chieko, Chieko was the niece. And she was ah twenty-two years old. And I and I told her I was twenty-two, but I was only twenty. [chuckling] And ah, I would go over to her house, and ah, this one story, it was kind of funny. But I was sitting up there, and they had these porcelain, big porcelain pots. They would put charcoal in, that's the way they heated these little, little, you know, real shanty type houses, with sliding doors, you know. And we were sitting there, around this porcelain pot, and all of a sudden a neighbor's chicken flew in. This was the second story, we were on. And they jumped up and closed those, those, the doors, and they invited me over for chicken dinner the next day. And so, I said, "You know, okay, I'll come over for chicken dinner." But then, they invited me to take a bath with them. And they had these big, big metal, ah oh big tubs like. Circular things. And ah, the ah, they'd heat water underneath it. Fire underneath it. And then ah, the men could go in first, and then the ladies. And then the boys, and then the girls. All use the same water. Well, I declined, I'm too shy for that! [chuckling] And so, so anyway, I did come over for the chicken dinner, and ah, and you know, it was just one little chicken. But, eight or eight or, I don't know. Her brother, she has a brother, Chieko had a brother who was in the Japanese army, but he was in the home guard. So he never went overseas. But he was a relatively tall Japanese guy. And ah, and we would have arm wrestling contests and all that baloney stuff. But ah we had a, you know, it was a nice time. And then Chieko worked in a bank, and ah she would, and Yuki Ioki was her aunt. This old lady that I met. And ah, she would sneak over, take off early from the bank, and go over to Yuki's house, and then we would visit there yet. And it was kind of fun! And all the guys I knew, all had girlfriends, you know. It was just, what are you going to do?

Brooks: Do you remember how you spell Chieko?

Groenke: C-H-I-E-K-O. But, Chieko, I think that's close.

Brooks: Something like that.

Groenke: Yeah, but ah, but she was nice. And then we moved up ah after a while, it was great liberty. We, in ah, oh! One other time, I was a little nervous, I was coming back from Yuki's house and it was dark. And you weren't supposed to be out at night. But, they only have two little dirt roads. And one little light bulb, like a hundred watt light bulb every, at the end of every block, you know. And so, I'm walking to my, down to my billet, and here's ah I would say, probably seven or eight, something like that, Japanese soldiers, locked arm in arm, like this. Walking right for me! Well, these were, they were, letting, getting these Japanese from China

were coming back to Japan at this point. And then, you know, they won the war, Japan, Japan won the war in China, you know, they were the victors, really. But, ah, so here's six or seven or eight of them, walking arm in arm and just me facing 'em! [Laughter] And I thought to myself, "You know, geez, if they jump me and I got killed, nobody would ever know where I was, 'cause I would have been A.W.O.L.!" [Laughter] But anyway, ah, I knew, I was in track, I, and I could run fast. I, I knew I could out run them. But anyway, we just eye-balled each other and walked by. So that was kind of interesting, too.

Brooks: What were you doing, like on a regular daily basis when you weren't, you know, kind of wandering around and having liberties? Did you have an assignment?

Groenke: Well, in, in, in Japan then we, there wasn't really, you weren't working out or anything like that. It was mostly ah you know, doing nothing, or just walking around or things like that. I had a cousin that came and visited me, Lyle Guston was his name. He was an Army guy and they had, he was in ah Europe and after the war was over in Europe, the war in Japan, and they had sent him along with a lot of other guys, to Japan. And he found out where I was through, you know my mother or something, what my address was and ah one day I came up and we were sleeping in cots then, in a huge big room and maybe fifty or eighty cots all lined up and ah I was laying in the cot and ah, one of my buddies said, "Hey, Ken, there's a guy looking for you!" And so, I said, he's downstairs or wherever, and I said, "Well, okay, I'll see him." And here was my, my cousin, Lyle Guston! And he found me and ah he stayed overnight in my, in my cot and I stayed in a buddies cot who was on, doing something else. And, ah, then I, then he caught a train back to -- he was up in Tokyo. And then the other thing that was really nice that I enjoyed, and I forget about this a lot of times, we were ah, you know, we didn't have any, we had liberties, but you know, it was, it was just really a thrill to see a white gal, you know. And I know, one time I was up on the telephone pole working on a line and here a Jeep full of nurses came by and I almost fell off the pole! [Laughing] It was so, it was so exciting! [Laughter] And ah, but ah, you know, neither here nor there. But ah

Brooks: Did you get to talk to them?

Groenke: No. No. They were all officers, I'm just a nobody. But, then, then they thought well we should have somebody, should have some more better liberty, you know. Because we were, it didn't, it was liberty but it just didn't ah just on Nagasaki. And, so, ah there ah, there was a place called Gamagori up in, near Tokyo, near Yokohama. And ah, that's were the Japanese had a rest camp for their, for the army. And so ah, but not everybody could go. And so, every section, or every, I guess section, one

guy from the communications section could go. Now, how do you get the one guy? So we decided, or somebody decided that we would draw cards and high card, when you get all done, you know, one guy, one guy and then you keep going down. And ah, would, would go. Well, it was between me and another guy at that point, and geez, I drew a six. And I thought, "Oh, shoot! You know, I'm out of it!" But he drew a five! [Laughter] So, so I could go and took the train up to, up to Gamagori, is what it's called. And that was for like a week of ah, you know, rest camp, it was a rest camp. And they had sumo wrestling there and they had ah, you know all nice things, good food and it was very, very enjoyable. And, just as an aside, they had a causeway going out to a little dinky island that was all cemeteries out there. And they had a little Shinto shrine that was, at the beginning of the causeway. And I had ah somebody, some guy with a camera took a picture of me in the front of that causeway going to that cemetery. And ah, and I send that home and about, oh, I don't know, thirty, forty years later, after I was married, my wife and I went to Japan. And I said, "Well, well let's find, and we went to Yokohama, and Tokyo and all that. But, then let's take the bullet train down to Gamagori." I wanted to see if that's there. And so, ah we did and got off at Gamagori and nobody could speak English. And ah, but anyway, I got a taxi and I told them what, you know, about the rest camp, Japanese rest camp, World War II, blah, blah. And so he couldn't find it but it was near a real big Buddha that was maybe twenty feet tall, or something like that. Well, he dropped us off at a bowling alley and there was no bowling alleys when I was there. But, across the street from the bowling alley here's a fenced off big area with red, you know crosses, "Don't Enter". That was the, that was Gamagori! That was the, I mean that was the rest camp. And so, Joanie and I went in there and we looked all over and then here's this ah, ah causeway and I got a picture of Joan standing in the same place that I-- I didn't know it at the time, that that I was standing! And then when I got home, here I looked in the book that my brother had kept for us, ah, you know, my picture and her picture 40 years later! [chuckling]

Brooks: Wow!

Groenke: Interesting, you know.

Brooks: What happened to the camp that it was all closed off?

Groenke: Well, it, it, I don't know. They just ah, you know it was, that was for the army and so they didn't need it anymore, that was a big rest camp for armies, soldiers. And ah, when ah MacArthur got in there, they couldn't have an army and you know. They don't have much of an army now. So, they, it's probably something else, or they're going to tear it all down. You know, it was, it was nothing then. But anyway--

Brooks: How was it being back in Japan?

Groenke: How, how was it--

Brooks: How was it being back, when you went back with your wife?

Groenke: Oh that was really interesting. I hadn't gotten up to Tokyo when I was in the service, and we, that's where we were. We went to Tokyo first, and then I was like to golf, and I still do. And Joan liked to golf, my wife, Joan liked to golf, and up in Tokyo, they have a ah, a ah, driving range, it's in the shape of a, of a half a moon, you know, a curve, a big moon. Three stories high or maybe even more. And they had little spots on it that ah, that ah, in back of a, in front of a pneumatic tube where golf balls would come up, and you'd have a bucket underneath it. And a guy with a cart with drinks and ah, and you, you'd get up there and it's just a flat place and then a net in front so you wouldn't fall, fall over, the net would catch you. And you rented golf clubs and you'd hit these golf balls. The place was just white with golf balls, because the Japanese, they like golf, but land is so expensive there and the never did get into it until now. But ah, that's, that's where they could golf. That was it. And then saw a lot of other stuff, you know. Ate and of course, I couldn't speak Japanese, but ah, ah well, let's say, " O-namae wa nan desu ka?" That means "what is your name?" Ah, "Aishiteimasu". That means, "I love you." [Laughing]

Brooks: That could be important!

Groenke: Yeah, well, I, that was the extent of it!

Brooks: [laughing] That's all you need!

Groenke: And so, yeah, well, it was fun, we just had a good time! And--

Brooks: Did you keep in touch with anyone you met, any Japanese that you met, like your Japanese girlfriend, or anybody?

Groenke: No. No. Ah, I didn't and, you know, no. I, don't think she, I don't think they, she couldn't write English anyway, and ah, you know. It was -- oh! they were going, when we moved up the Sasebo from Nagasaki, our whole group moved up there, and that's a big ah port city, then she and Yuki were going to come up to visit me but, but they said they would and I believed them. I really thought they would, but, you know, who knows. And she, Yuki, had was going to give me, 'cause she really liked my mother. And I would give her a lot of stuff. She had from the last Queen of the Hawaiian Islands, she had a brooch made up that she wanted me to, for my mother, you know. And ah, and that's what she was going to bring up and ah, but it fell by the wayside.

Brooks: So it never happened?

Groenke: That never happened. But anyway, she was very nice, I know she meant well. But ah so, how goes it? [Chuckling]

Brooks: So then after Nagasaki, you went where?

Groenke: Oh, after, after Nagasaki, I went to Sasebo. Or Sasebo, or Sasebo, we called it Sasebo. And then, they ah, I saw a, one guy was thrown, my remembrance of that. And, you know, it was all, we had a switchboard and everything. And I had ah, ah one, a couple of bad things. Oh, one at least I remember, bad thing happened. We were moving this switchboard up, and we, you know, there's a little cubicle on the top of the building and ah, I had ah, a couple of guys bringing this heavy switchboard in, with steel feet, you know. And I had my, my thumb, yeah my thumb, was, was like this. And they set that thing down right on my thumb. That thumb turned black immediately. Immediately! Did that hurt! And, geez, there was nothing I could do about it you know. And, 'cause we were just moving in, and ah, oh, I put it in hot water, I held it over my head. And oh! It was just smashed! Finally, I went to the sick bay, they had a sick bay in that same building, but they didn't have anything set up, you know. Normally, you'd have like a little electric drill, that you could just drill through the nail, you know, but they didn't have any of that stuff. He says, "Well, the only thing I got is my big K-Bar". That's this big knife, you know? And ah, he had me set that thumb down, and then he took this knife and put the tip of it on, and he just was twisting it--

Brooks: Oh, no!

Groenke: --'til he got, 'til he got through the nail. And the blood was spurting out! Oh, but that felt good! But that hurt. [Chuckling] So, that was, that was my wound. Another guy, one fellow though, he was thrown, he was trying to make an antennae and he ah through it over these telephone lines, but they happened to be electric lines. And the Japanese didn't have any money, not like the Americans did, you know. And these ah, lines were not ah, they were just bare. And so this wire went right over on an electric line, electric thing and he got electrocuted. I was just outside, right by him and, whew! He just fell and started smoking. So that was no good. But ah, but that's the way it goes. But that's too bad and to have that happen, you know, after the war is all over. So.

Brooks: Yeah, did you have a sense of when you were going to be getting to go home?

Groenke: Well, we used to have a saying early on: The Golden Gate in '48. But ah

Brooks: In 1948?

Groenke: Yeah. Well, well we thought, you know, that was forever! But ah, but I- I made it before that. Yeah, at first, ah, well I was nine months in Japan, you know, about nine months. And ah, they had said, "Well, we're going go then, and this time and that time. "But we finally went in May or June of '46. And so, I remember, you know, we got on board ship and we didn't know if we were going to go all the way around, ah through the ah, you know, through the, well, we didn't know if we were going to go to the east coast or not, you know. But ah, at first I thought east coast. But then, anyway, we went all the way around through Panama Canal and went through the canal, which was, which was interesting. And then, ah, arrived at Norfolk and then I mentioned ah, you know, I didn't expect a band or anything because, ah I was you know just kidding when I said that, but I never did. But ah, what, what, what ah was there on the docks, was a, was a big black dog. That was our greeter! And then I mentioned, in the letter, but it was a good looking dog! [Laughing] That was our greeting!

Brooks: Was it just a stray dog?

Groenke: Yeah, just a stray dog walking, you know. So that was nice. Then we went to, got discharged at Great Lakes, and then ah got home, you know.

Brooks: What was your discharge like? Was there like just paperwork?

Groenke: No. Well--

Brooks: Standard?

Groenke: Nothing, really. It, you know, no I don't remember, you had to sign papers and so forth. And ah--

Brooks: Did they try to keep you in the Marines?

Groenke: Oh, yeah. You, you could if you wanted to re-enlist, you could get another rank, or something like that. But after all that time I-I didn't, you know, I was happy to get out.

Brooks: Had either of your brothers gotten to the age where they were drafted or enlisted?

Groenke: No. No. My second, the second brother enlisted. You know, he's got a doctorate and he's still in Arizona. He's retired, of course. He's eighty-six,

now. It's amazing to have a younger brother whose eighty-six. But [laughing]--

Brooks: It happens!

Groenke: Yeah, it does! So, anyway.

Brooks: So, he enlisted but he didn't have to--

Groenke: No, he, he, no. He, he enlisted because he got schooling or something. It was a good deal and he-he got to be a pilot! He went to Pensacola, but he never really got his wings because the war was over, you know, then. And they didn't need anymore pilots. But he, he did take pilot's training, so he did, you know, was flying, or learning how to fly. But ah, no, I talk to him every week or so.

Brooks: That's great! Were you jealous that he got to go to pilot school?

Groenke: No, not at that time. [Chuckling] No, although I did, I had the G.I. Bill, you know and I thought, geez, I would like to fly, you know, and still get it on the G. I. Bill. But then I got married and, you know, just, you know.

Brooks: Yeah.

Groenke: Yeah.

Brooks: What was your homecoming like when you actually got back? Did you go back to Racine?

Groenke: Well, ah, my folks and my younger brother and sister met me at the Racine Depot there, the train depot. And I was always surprised; my brother was as tall as I was. And when I left, you know, he was like this or something like that. And ah, well it was very, it was nice. I mean, it was, no, no big parties, or nothing like that. But I got in contact with all my buddies and you know, swapped a lot of stories, and, you know, had a good time.

Brooks: So, did you end up using the G. I. Bill?

Groenke: Ah, yeah! I went to college. I went to ah, University of Wisconsin, and then I went to Kent State in Ohio. But I never graduated, I was maybe a year short, but I, it was too much, it was too much like the Marines, in a way. And Kent State, it was, I was in a Quonset hut with about thirty other guys, you know, and ah, it was, you know, and, and ah, I don't know, it, it just didn't turn me on. I, they, this stuff, the stuff I was interested in business, and I took advertising and things like that. But, it just seemed

like kind of a waste of time to me. So, so I, I got out and my brother, he was out of the Navy at that time, and we bought a little grill called a Grayke's (sp??) Grill. It was a little twelve stooler, in Racine by the, by the zoo. Right on the corner by the zoo. You know, we had, that's what we did, but it taught me never to get into the cooking, the restaurant business again, it was seven days a week. That was no good, but ah, so we got rid of that. But anyway, I was very fortunate, I had a lot of different jobs, I was with Pitney Bowes, all different stuff. But then I finally wound up as an insurance man, and I'm so happy I did that. And I, I got ah, went to a lot of schooling and I was ah well, let's see, what was I? Geez, I can't even think.

Jennifer: Washington National.

Groenke: No, no, what was the designation?

Jennifer: Oh, a CLU.

Groenke: Yeah, Charter Life Underwriter. And I was a Charter Financial Consultant. My brain goes! [Laughter] But ah, but anyway, that was fortunately, very successful and I, you know, I was happy about that. So everything worked out just great. You know.

Brooks: Did you join any other veteran's organizations?

Groenke: Yeah, I joined the VFW and ah, and ah the American Legion. In fact, I still join, I'm still in both of those. But I have to say, I'm really not a joiner anymore, you know. I'm in it and I pay my dues, but I'm not gung ho, you know, in that so much. Right when we were first married and I had ah, my first child was a boy, and I was more gung ho at that time. And ah, on the Fourth of July Parade, Joanie, my wife, took Rick, my son, to the parade that I was in. I was marching, you know, in uniform with the rifle, and Rick was really impressed. So, but that's about it.

Brooks: Is that your son that joined the Navy?

Groenke: Yeah.

Brooks: And how did you feel about him going into the service?

Groenke: Oh, I was happy that he went in the Navy because, you know, in the Marines you don't ah, Navy will train you. And he was trained in electronics, and he was on a ship that did all that electronics stuff, you know, and ah, you wouldn't have got that in the Marines. It was more, more fighting in the Marines, it was just, you know, little things like that.

But ah, so I was very happy and ah, he's doing real well now, and he's sixty-three now.

Brooks: Wow.

Groenke: Just a kid [chuckling].

Jennifer: He was in Vietnam and now his son is in Afghanistan.

Groenke: Yeah, yeah.

Brooks: So that's a little legacy in the family.

Groenke: Right and my dad was in World War II, or World War I, but he didn't go overseas or anything and my grandfather was in the German army, so there's quite a ah [chuckling]

Brooks: Yeah, there's a whole tradition there!

Groenke: Yeah! I

Brooks: And your grandson who is in, is he, what branch of the service is he in?

Groenke: He what?

Brooks: What branch of service is--

Groenke: Oh, he's in the Army. Yeah, yeah. He's--

Brooks: Mixing it up?

Groenke: He's a sergeant, he was in tanks and, ah, heavy machine guns and things like that. But now he's in Texas and so, he'll have, I think he's got seventeen years in now, and trying to get twenty, you know. So he can retire then.

Brooks: That's neat! So do you have any big thoughts like about what the military meant for you and your life and growing up?

Groenke: Well, I think it was good for me, as it turned out. Everything in retrospect, you know, turned out very, very well. I ah, I was very fortunate, and that gives you an education, you know. And I could see, I saw the world and explored, you know, a lot of different things and ah, everything seemed to work out well. Ah, my, I met my wife, I was going with a girl at the time, a different one, and ah fortunately, that didn't work out, but that, that was, and I was able to meet my wife, which was fantastic! She's such a

wonderful, such a wonderful woman. And ah, you know, really loved her and have five wonderful children. You couldn't, you couldn't ask for any more wonderful children than I've got [laughter].

Brooks: And you don't have to say that!

Groenke: [Laughs] Well, I like to say that!

Brooks: So, your daughter, Jennifer, has kind of following, documenting your military career, so she found all these letters and everything. So how does that, how does it feel kind of rehashing all this stuff?

Groenke: Well, you know, it's really nice, because I-I asked my mother, everything was censored, you know, when you were over seas. And the censors would cut out, you couldn't say where you were, you couldn't do this and that. But, so I said, I asked my mother to save the letters, and when I get home, I can explain, you know what happened here and what happened there, and so forth. And, but you know, when I got home we never did look at them. Then went in a, I had a big, kind of a trunk ah, from the service and ah, it was, it was an equipment locker, trunk. Anyway, they were in that. And with ah uniforms and things of that nature, and that, that was in the garage, my, my garage when I got married, up-up on top, and then we sold that house, and Jennifer wound up with it because ah, I don't know, I can't remember why. But she had it in her basement and then ah, and she never really looked at, but we knew, at some point, she knew letters were in there. And ah, and I did, too, but we never really looked at them. And then, there was a flood in her basement but fortunately this trunk was up high and wasn't flooded, but she went down there to look at it. And everything was perfect and she started reading the letters. And she said, "Dad, we got to do something about this. This is history!" It's like when I was young the Civil War, you know, you would, you talk about the guys from the Civil War. And ah, so ah, so she took it upon herself, which was great. And she got a videographer, and she set that, this whole thing up. You know. And a lot of other stories we could have said, but you know, an hour and twenty-four minutes is probably too much for you! [chuckling]

Brooks: I don't think so!

Groenke: No.

Brooks: I thoroughly enjoyed it. Yeah, it was great!

Groenke: I, I'm glad you did. But, you know, it was, it's history, and, a hundred years from now, you know, somebody's going to be interested in that sort of stuff, I think.

Brooks: Yeah, exactly. Yeah, and that's what we try to do here with these interviews at the museum, and you know, that's kind of the point of gathering everyone's stories and things, and so it was great to talk with you and do you have anything, is there anything I didn't ask, or anything you wanted to mention that we skipped?

Groenke: Jennifer, can you think of one thing?

Jennifer: Well, I always wished that you would describe marching into Nagasaki. Ah, the way that you told it to me. It's, 'cause no, that's a pretty pivotal experience that, that nobody else will, nobody even knows about. That experience, and I- I try to draw out from you, ah really what it sounded like and, and smelled like, and looked like and how, what it heard.

Groenke: Okay--

Jennifer: Like what it sounded like when you got off the ship and were marching towards--

Groenke: Yeah, let me, let me say that then. Yeah, this dirt road we were going up to this old school, and ah, the brave Japanese were standing on both sides of this road. And I told you that the kids were running around. But ah, they didn't know what was going on and this smelled just like real, real old! Japan smelled, if you can imagine, how something old smells. You know, the wood and everything was really, really old. And then, as we ah, as we got into the city, we found, you know, a lot of people were burned and I've got pictures of those. But ah, which was horrible, but they, the people were all hungry, I mean they were starving, you know. And one of the, one of the jobs I had, we had a lot of K Rations, which were like twice the size of a Cracker Jack box, you know. And it had ah, you know food in it, you know. And we were in a big six by six truck, big truck, it was just loaded with all of these K Rations. And so we went into the town, ah we were in town anyway, and we were in a crossroads there, and started giving this, you know, tossing these Cracker Jack, K Rations out. And there were just huge group of people around just reaching for it and all that. And from that top of that truck, I could see a line from, you know, there were seven hills I mentioned. Ah, a black line coming down from one of the hills, just, you know, miles, you know black. They were all coming into the city again because they heard that we weren't killing everybody --because Tojo said we were killing everybody, you know. So, when they realized we weren't, then you know, then they, then they started coming in. And even when we ate outside, ah we had this, we ate outside and ah, there was a fence around it. And ah, the, the cooks would, you know, have big pots of food and we would, with our mess gear, walk down the line and get the food. Well, all these people, many of them, would reach their hands through this fence, you know, just for some food!

And then, we would give them, you know and ah, a lot of the guys wouldn't eat all their potatoes, or something and then they could reach in and you know, scrape that off the mess gear. So, you know, they were hungry, and it was, you know, it was kind of sad. But ah, but we did treat them nice, and ah, I-I thought we did and I think MacArthur did a wonderful job as Governor or whatever, in Japan, even though none of the Marines liked MacArthur. We had a saying, when, when MacArthur re-took the Philippines, he did it with the help of God and a few Marines! [Chuckling] He was a pretty cocky guy! But anyway, he did a wonderful job in Japan!

Brooks: Did you--what were you expecting when you landed in Nagasaki? Do you know? Did you have any idea what to expect when you got off the ship?

Groenke: No, no! I really didn't, because you know, gee! Japan, in my way of thinking and reading in the books, you know, it was so old! In Japan, well jeepers creepers! And you know, the ladies all had these black pants, and wooden shoes and things like this! It ah, ah it really, it was different, just really different. Now if you go Japan and we went, when my wife and I went to Tokyo, you know, oh cripes! It was so modern and just, you know. In fact, our television sets came from Tokyo, first! Or Japan first, the flat screens. But ah, ah it was, it was a different world, that's really what it was.

Brooks: Yeah, what about the Marines in the military in general? Was it what you expected it to be?

Groenke: Yeah, yeah. I, it was. It ah, it was ah, well it was hard in training, you know. And ah, the ah drill instructors were tough and, and at that time, they could ah, they could, you know, hit people. I shouldn't really say that but ah, it wasn't--, now a days, you can't even lay a hand on anybody. But ah, ah, when you're marching, if a, if a guy wasn't, if he's out of step or something in a platoon, sixty men in a platoon. All of a sudden you hear clump! clump! clump! clump! A big six foot four drill instructor, all of a sudden you didn't know if you were doing anything wrong, and he would, a little guy behind me would get a kick in the butt, you know. Then if you didn't like that, you know, he'd slam his down on his pith helmet, they called it, you know. And then ah, the strap would break and the thing would be bouncing on his head. And, and ah, the guy picked on him because ah, his mother, this kid's mother, ah wrote a letter to the lieutenant, or whatever, saying that he never, that she never heard from him. And that got down to the drill instructor and he got bawled out because, you know, his, this kid didn't write to his mother. And then he had to stand with-- and I, my hut was adjacent to the window of the drill instructor's hut, so I could look in, look into that. And he had to stand there with his nine pound rifle, held out and he could not drop his hands

and you know after a while you are standing on your tip-toes and the drill instructor is hollering at him! But ah, but anyway, it was, it was good experience. I mean, really, nobody got really hurt or anything.

Brooks: Sure.

Groenke: And except I had to go through the belt line, you heard that I suppose? Yeah, we were supposed to, at the rifle range, we were not supposed to ah, ah go to the P.X. The P. X. was right around the corner and my buddy, this was Irv Christensen, we met up there. And ah, or Bob Christensen. And we were sitting in the back of the ah, of this ah barracks. And geez, it was a hot day, and I says, or one of us said, "Hey, let's go to the P.X., anyway. We can get ourselves some ice cream." So we both went, you know, and we got a pint, a pint of ice cream a piece, you know. Then we sat, sat on the back steps eating, so happy, eating the ice cream! And all of a sudden, you know, there's a lot of noise around 'cause all these guys are here. And all of sudden it was deathly quiet! And that's, that drew our suspicion and we turned around and here's this big six foot four drill instructor standing right behind us. "I told you you could not go into the P.X.! So now eat the ice cream, right away!" Well you have to eat the ice cream real fast, and of course, it burns, but you had to do it! And then he says, "Now, I'm calling the whole platoon out." Sixty guys - and had them line up in two, two parallel lines. And ah, and I-I, he told them to take their belts off, but he, but hold the buckle. Don't, don't-- hold the buckle in your hand. And then we had to run at the, the, you know, through the middle of that, those two lines, to one end while they were swinging their belts at our back. You know, they didn't swing at the head, but you know, swing as hard as they could, 'cause the drill instructor didn't want any soft swinging! [Chuckling] And, then ah, run one side, then run down the other and ah, as I mentioned before, we figured out right away, 'cause we weren't that dumb, but if you closed, if you run right next to, or very close to one, the line, one line, well they couldn't really swing at you! The other side could, but only one side could. And then, back close to the other side. So, we had a good kick out of it, it didn't hurt us. [laughter]

Brooks: So you think it toughened you up?

Groenke: Oh, yeah! It I, I was always kind of happy. But ah, it, it was, well I can't say I was always happy. But ah, but it, it toughened you up and I mean, and the guy, and a lot of guys would be fighting. Well, you know, everybody was kind of tough, so but, it was, you know, if you can, if you can hold your own, you're doing all right!

Brooks: Yeah, you got young guys!

Groenke: Yeah, right! And nobody's out to kill us, you know, so, except the Japanese! But ah, so I don't know, does that kind of wind it up for you?

Brooks: I think so, yeah, that's everything I've got so.

Groenke: Okay! Nothing else?

Jennifer: Oh, I could go on and on forever.

Brooks: Well, we'll stop for now. Thank you.

Groenke: Thank you.

[End of Interview]