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World War II

I grew up in a small town in northeastern Oklahoma named Okay, about halfway between Tulsa and the Arkansas border. We used to call it Lapland (where Arkansas laps over into Oklahoma). About the only industry there was a factory that had manufactured oilfield trucks at one time and then became a canning factory. They finally assembled a couple of airplanes there. My high school probably had about 50 students, 10 of whom were in my graduating class in 1938. Ours was the largest senior class at the school in several years. A couple of years before that, only two students graduated. Of course, everybody knew everybody, and we were almost like brothers and sisters. I've stayed in touch with two or three of my classmates over the years.

After high school, I went to work with my dad at a construction company in Louisiana. That summer was enough to convince me that wasn't the way I wanted to make a living. The following fall, I attended a business college in Tulsa. I wound up going to Washington, D.C., in the summer of 1941 to work for the FBI as a fingerprint technician. My job was to stand in front a bunch of fingerprints all night and searched for matches with prints sent in by law enforcement or the military. That way, they would know whether or not the person had a criminal record. It was quite an interesting job. Mr. Hoover was quite popular then. I shook hands with him once and didn't wash them for a while. It was almost like touching the hand of God.

On December 7, 1941, I was at the First Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., when Pearl Harbor was bombed. All the service men and FBI agents were called out of the church. Years later, after the war, I attended that same church regularly. President Truman used to sit reasonably close to me. Sometimes I even sat in the pew behind him. Of course, no one ever sat on the pew with him if they could help it.

When I entered the service, the Marine Corps did a good job of indoctrinating us. We weren't fighting the Japanese; we were fighting "Japs". I was in boot camp for nine weeks, and the training was excellent. Though I can't say I enjoyed everything, it probably was one of the best things to ever happen to me. I learned self-reliance and gained the ability to stand up and do what had to be done. Most of us got called everything from A to Z, but it really didn't bother us.

They stressed that the most important thing was to do the job we were told to do. We did. If the drill instructor told us to duck our heads, we ducked our heads. He warned us that we would get our head shot off if someone told us that some day and we didn't listen. That got through to us very quickly. At the time, the military didn't openly acknowledge that anyone was looking after us, though I'm sure many of the officers and NCOs were Christians.

At boot camp, our gear was stored in a locker box. Each recruit was given a lock and two keys for our locker box. Wearing one key on a dog tag chain around our neck, we had to give the other key to our drill instructor. He told us, "Some wise guy's going to lock his key in his locker box. When he does, he belongs to me." Sure enough, a recruit in our outfit did just that one morning during our second week. Instead of telling the drill instructor and getting chewed out, he walked across the street to another barrack and got an empty locker box. Then he pried the hasp off his old locker box and changed boxes. Unfortunately, someone told on him.

The drill instructor had all 60 of us fall out holding locker boxes, full of everything we owned, over our heads. Then he had us do a close order drill, still holding the boxes on top of our heads. After about five minutes of that, he stopped us. But nobody would tell him anything. So he had us do it another five minutes. At that point, some little guy at the end of the line, who was getting run over every time we turned around, said, "Okay. So-and-so did it." Then the drill instructor gave us five more minutes because we had told on our buddy. That was a lesson in facing the music and that 95% of what happens to a person is really his own fault.

I went to field telephone communications school in New River, North Carolina. Afterward I was assigned to the Artillery Training Battalion at Quantico. The 5<sup>th</sup> Division was formed in New River in late 1943 or early 1944, and I returned to join them before we went for training at Camp Pendleton in California. I was a field wireman by then. Three men worked with me to lay wire between the artillery and the infantry all over North Carolina and Camp Pendleton.

Our next assignment was at Camp Tarawa, located on the Parker Ranch on the big island of Hawaii, for more training. That was quite an operation.

In late January 1945, we left for Iwo Jima. After docking in Saipan, we were supposed to get a day off. By nine o'clock the next morning, however, the first watch came back to the ship in bad shape. Everything on the base was open around the clock, so a lot of those men went to the slot chutes at the Post Exchange and drank beer. Then they started having trouble with the local troops, and the MP's closed them down. As a result, the rest of us got restricted to the ship though we still could see land as we stayed onboard.

Unfortunately, I was one of those men who always got seasick. The first time we sailed, I didn't know whether anything was going to stay down or come back up for about three days. There's no other sickness quite like it. I remember a story about an old sergeant walking up to a young sailor standing by the ship's rail and saying, "Son, you'll be all right when the moon comes up." The kid replied, "You mean that's coming up, too?" Those were the kind of things we had to just laugh about. A sense of humor helped a lot.

I was onboard an LST (Low Stationary Target). Our tank deck was full of .105 ammunition, and our landing ducks were sitting on top of it. After our aborted liberty in Saipan, we sailed for Iwo. When we arrived that morning, it was an amazing sight. The eight-and-a-half-square-mile island harboring 22,000 Japanese soldiers was surrounded by hundreds of our ships carrying three Marine divisions and all the supporting troops.

Two divisions hit the beach the first day. Around noon, our artillery group went in around noon to support the infantry outfits of the 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> Marines. Losing one or two ducks in the process, we had a hard time getting ammunition to the gun positions. Finally, we succeeded in

reaching the positions and were able to get the guns ready to fire. The sand on the beach was too deep to provide a good foothold, so we had to crawl. (At home, I have a container of Iwo sand.) As we were leaving the island and returning to the ship, an intelligence officer asked me what I had for a souvenir? I gave him my dog tags. That was really all I wanted.

About 100,000 Marines, sailors and soldiers participated in the Battle of Iwo Jima. More than 6,000 were killed. During the five years of World War II, something like 375 Congressional Medals of Honor were awarded. Twenty-seven of those were presented to men who fought at Iwo. A Marine lieutenant, a young fellow named Jack who had graduated from Baylor University and been an All-American athlete, was one of those so honored. He had made it all the way through to the last two weeks of the battle. While leading his platoon against a position, he stepped on a land mine. Jack lost both his legs but managed to live for about two days. He told one of the doctors that he guessed the New York Giants had lost one heck of an end. I understand there is a monument to him on the Baylor University campus. I'm glad Jack got the recognition and honor he deserved.

Another man in our outfit, Johnny Basilone, was awarded a Congressional Medal of Honor for his actions on Guadalcanal with the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division. Unfortunately, he was not a good peacetime Marine. Back in the States after Guadalcanal, he did his share of making the beer halls and couldn't stay out of trouble. So they sent him back out with the 27<sup>th</sup> Marines. He had been ashore at Iwo about two hours when he caught a mortar shell in his lap. A Navy ship was later named after Johnny.

There were all kinds of stories about such heroes. There also were stories just as poignant or dramatic that people never heard. Some say the men pictured raising the American flag at Iwo posed for that famous shot. Our artillery was located at the foot of Sarhbach, so I saw two flags go up. When they raised the first flag, there was quite a celebration. Then they took that flag down to raise a larger one, and Joe Rosenthal happened to be there to take that picture. A Marine Corps combat correspondent, Lou Lowery, took the picture of the original flag being raised. He was quite bitter about it, but got over it. There is no question that the Marine Corps profited greatly from that circumstance. It was probably one of the best pictures to come out of World War II.

It's unfortunate that three of those flag-raisers were killed before they could get off the island. Two others died later as alcoholics—Ira Hayes, a Puma Indian from Arizona, and Rene Gagnon from New Hampshire. Both young men were unable to face reality after they returned to the States and were put in a war bond drive by the Marines. They were just kids and had no idea about war bond drives, but they raised more money in that campaign than had been in the national budget prior to World War II.

I feel very fortunate to have survived Iwo Jima. I went ashore three times before I finally was able to stay. The first time, I went in with the first wave of artillery. The Japanese had bracketed our landing duck (an amphibious vehicle) on the beach. Unable to get enough traction in the deep sand, we couldn't make it up the hill. Since we were under fire from the enemy, I figured we better get out of the duck. My three-man wire team and everyone else on the vehicle went with me, except the driver. It was loaded with .105 ammunition and communication gear when a mortar was dropped right in the middle of it. I was sent back to the ship for more gear and didn't make it back until after dark. At that point, the duck driver refused to take his vehicle on the beach. So, once again, I returned to the ship. When I reported to our commanding officer, he told the driver to get back to the beach and get there in a hurry. He didn't even give me time to get back down the ladder. The next morning, I went in again with another load of supplies.

Never wounded, I laid telephone lines everywhere. The passwords were names of American automobiles one night when we were laying line to an infantry outfit. As we pulled out the wire, I suddenly heard the bolt of an M-1 slide back and a round go in the chamber. About that time, the three of us started shouting the names of about 15 American automobiles. We knew what they were right quick. Later, that seemed funny, but not that night.

At night, of course, everything is magnified. They were bombarding the island from the sea and the air. So there was a lot of noise. Worried that no one would be able to hear me, I would shout into the phone when communicating with other officers. They had to tell me to quiet down because the enemy could hear me, too. When the firing would stop for some reason, the silence was eerie.

I was sleeping in a foxhole one night when I kept hearing a real racket. I was concerned that someone was trying to crawl into my foxhole and assumed everyone could hear it. But it turned out to be a land crab crawling across my poncho that was covering me.

During our last three weeks on Iwo, I ran a switching central, which is a point between the artillery and infantry. Our job was to keep lines of communication operating. I don't believe Marines ever really retreat. One afternoon, I was sitting in a foxhole with the switchboard when I saw a bunch of guys coming back. When I asked what was happening, one of them told me, "Well, I think we're retreating. The Japanese are just about 100 yards behind us, so I'd advise you to get your gear and get out of here." So we pulled up and moved back about 200-300 yards and dug in for the night. The next day, we took the same hole we had been in before.

I tried to find time during all this to read the Bible or attend services held by the non-denominational chaplains. A lot of men went to those services, and a lot of men did not. I wasn't afraid of dying as much as I was afraid of not being able to do what I was supposed to do. The thought of dying may have crossed my mind the first time I went ashore. But after I had been there a while, I didn't think about it, despite the constant explosions and gunfire around me. Maybe that was part of the training, too. Our outfit suffered some casualties, but not nearly as many as the infantry boys had.

We were on Iwo Jima for 36 days. From the first day until almost the last day, there was no safe place, and there was no way to leave the island. At least in Europe, the soldiers were able to find safe havens in different areas. Our .105 ammunition dump was hit one afternoon, and we had to put the fire out. One of the bravest acts I witnessed during that time occurred when a sergeant major named Smitty was leading a group toward the fire with shells exploding all over the place. I remember wondering how he could do it.

We returned to Camp Tarawa in Hawaii when we left Iwo. Then I was sent back to OCS in Quantico. I was there when the Americans dropped the atomic bombs on Japan. The military was trying to get rid of soldiers. They gave us a choice of returning to our old units, stick around for the next Officer Candidates class, or go home. Out of my platoon, only about five men stayed in the service. Three or four of them were V-12 students, so they didn't really have a choice. A couple of sergeants opted to stay in because they intended to become officers and make that their career. The rest of us went home. That was the best choice.

I was back in Washington, D.C., by October 1945 after the bombs were dropped in August. I attended college at George Washington University and moved to Texas in 1950. Over the years, I've stayed in contact with some of my friends from the Marine Corps and have attended several reunions of the 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Division. I had to miss this year's meeting in Kansas City, Missouri. Last year, about 300 survivors got together in Tucson. We're well supported and pretty active.

When I went into the service, someone gave me a small New Testament with the Marine Corps insignia stamped on the front of it. I carried that all the way through the service and for a long time afterward. About 20 years ago, I lost it while on a construction job in Abilene. I left it in my hotel room and never found it. Though it might not have been used as much as it should have been, it was used. Many soldiers probably prayed for God's protection as they dodged bullets in Iwo Jima, but a lot of us just accepted that protection as a fact. We knew we were doing the right thing and would be taken care of. At that point in time, I can't say that I truly recognized how much God was watching over me. Looking back now, I think he was.

I had been raised in both Methodist and Baptist churches. My family attended a small Baptist church in Muskogee, Oklahoma, and I was baptized in a rock-bottomed river in my hometown at the age of 16 or 17. It was customary at the time to baptize everyone in that great little swimming hole. When I began attending the First Baptist Church in Washington in 1941, I saw for the first time a choir in robes and a minister wearing a robe. It was a great place to be. For the next year or so, I went out every Sunday with a group of about 20 nice young people from that church.

Fortunately or unfortunately, kids growing up in small towns in the 1930s didn't have many things to distract us. Today I look at kids in high school or college and realize that by the time they reach the age of 25, they've had just about everything there is to have. I was 30 years old before I had my first car. My dad had been a farmer and later became a pipe fitter for a construction company. Like other families, we had only one car. I only was able to drive it on special occasions. But families then did provide love and Christian fellowship. Our parents taught us the difference between right and wrong. I never heard a word about "quality time". As a child, I used to hear all the time... "Kids are to be seen and not heard." You don't see much of that now. That doesn't mean I would want to go back to the way things were. In some ways, however, it might be good.

In the past, the military has received some bad raps. It is not the way to go if you want to be successful, though there are some people who have been happy with the military life. During the Depression years, a lot of people survived because of the military. Thank goodness we had some of those guys around when World War II came along, or we might not have made it. But I think there are enough young people around today who could do what has to be done if properly motivated. I don't believe they have learned as much about our history as we did or have had the same type of heroes. I think heroes are necessary, whether they be baseball players, firemen, aviators or whatever. Young people need someone to look up to in their formative years.

The attitude today seems to be that there is no one to blame or there is no wrong. I think we've gone too far and have become too politically correct. That may get us in trouble. I hope young people never have to face a situation like World War II. Though the terrorists' attack on September 11, 2001, was bad, it has not affected us that much as individuals. Until you have actually witnessed death firsthand, you don't know how it will affect you. We were very fortunate not to have lost more people than we did in that attack.

The first time I ever saw a dead man, we were going ashore in a duck. A group of men on a small boat had gone in before us. The boat had been blown up, and a man was floating in the water. No one was taking the time to pull him ashore. Seeing the dead 18 or 19-year-old washing back and forth in his life jacket, and realizing that no one seemed at all concerned about it, got the message across to me that the situation could be serious. That's one thing I don't think I'll ever forget.

In thinking about my war experiences or discussing them with my wife, I realize that God

had to have been there with me, or I wouldn't have made it. Sometimes the guy next to me didn't make it. That's something a soldier always wonders about, "Why him and not me?"

When I first heard about Pearl Harbor, I didn't even know where it was. Afterward, it didn't even seem unusual that the FBI was picking up Japanese people in Hawaii and on the West Coast. For a period of time following the war, I worked for a company in Washington, D.C., that contracted with the Chinese for work in China. A Japanese girl worked there who was as American as I was. She had gone to the University of Wyoming. Though her family had been among those picked up, she didn't seem to resent it at all. But the Chinese refused to deal with her. Today we hear a lot about racial profiling, though everyone does it. I never experienced any real discrimination, despite the fact that my father was half Cherokee Indian. He once told me, "Don't worry about what people say about you. Just ignore it and go on." His advice has worked for me. Discrimination has existed since the beginning of time, and it has existed everywhere.

I learned from my experiences in the war that there are a lot of good people in this world. They may not go to the same church we do or live in the same way or see things in the same way. Whether or not they are Christian is between them and God. Most of us, given a set of circumstances beyond our control, can adapt if we must. My Christian upbringing and lessons learned in church over the years have paid off for me, though my relationship with God may not be what others think it should be.