

**The National Museum of the Pacific War
(Admiral Nimitz Museum)**

Center for Pacific War Studies

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with

**PFC William (Bill) Steele I., Sr.
March 24, 2001**

This is Eddie Graham at the Nimitz Museum. I'm interviewing PFC Bill Steele of the 2nd Marine Division and he is going to tell us his story.

Mr. Graham: Ok, Bill, why don't you start out by telling us where you're from, where you were born.

Mr. Steele: I'm from Nashville, Tennessee. I was born about 12 miles from the center of Nashville north on the creek bank of Dry Creek January 6, 1924. My parents divorced when I was in diapers and my grandfather and grandmother raised me until I was 11 years old. I've been on my own since I was 11 and I lived with my aunt and uncle to get through grammar school. Then they figured when you got done with the 8th grade that you didn't need any more schooling. So I had to leave and go on my own and I worked that summer and then went back to high school in the fall of the year. I boarded with the schoolteacher and got money from the Roosevelt thing he had for young people in NYA and NRA and I cleaned the gym and stoked the boiler.

Mr. Graham: Ok. What's the name of your mom and dad?

Mr. Steele: My father's name was Floyd Tipton Steele, born in 1900, died in 1967. My mother was Pearl Adele Jones, maiden name Jones, and she was born in 1903 and died in 1990.

Mr. Graham: And how about any brothers and sisters?

Mr. Steele: I have one sister that's dead, she died when she was 2-1/2 years old, I was six months and I found out after I got grown that was one of the reasons that my mother and father separated because of the loss of a child.

Mr. Graham: Tell us something about your own children Bill.

Mr. Steele: I have one son; he was born in 1953, in January. I have one daughter born in May 1955 and a baby daughter born in September 1957 and they produced seven grandchildren and then they've remarried, all three of them and I have five step grandchildren and six great grandchildren.

Mr. Graham: Well, that's great. Ok, Bill, tell me, what were you doing and where were you at on December 7, 1941?

Mr. Steele: On December 6th we got the message through the principal that we was supposed to furnish the Air Force people from Dayton, Ohio a place to stay on Saturday night of December 6 and of course I took care of the boiler for the heat for the building and I was there on December 6 and spent the night there but the next morning they got some orders some way or another a notice or whatever but anyway they picked up and took off back to Dayton, Ohio. I cleaned up the gym and everything and went home and then in the middle of the day and I found out that they had bombed Pearl Harbor. And I didn't know where Pearl Harbor was; I'd never seen it on the map.

Mr. Graham: Ok, and tell us how you ended up joining the Marines.

Mr. Steele: Well, I lost my place to stay in 1942, May of 1942 and I'd been dating a girl since 1940 and I got strong after her to get married and I went to work in a defense plant and she was there, too, and we got married October 12, 1942 and I knew that I was going to be drafted because they were taking all the ones as soon as they got to be 19 they were picking them up. So in the first part of February I went down to the Distribution Center of all the people that was drafted at Tullahoma, Tennessee and talked to the Marine Sergeant in taking me, and he'd had his quota for the month but I told him to go over and talk to this Army Sergeant and they swapped out, he would take me and then take one less the next month and so I went in February of '43.

Mr. Graham: And where did you take your basic training?

Mr. Steele: Took my basic training, boot camp, at San Diego Base in California.

Mr. Graham: How would you describe your training at that time?

Mr. Steele: Well, it was new to us. Myself, I'd worked hard all the time and everything and exercised and played football and basketball in high school and I'd never thought anything about calisthenics and all that stuff that they'd done but it wasn't real

rough on me, I mean a lot of them wanted to faint everything like that there and get tired and all that but to me it was just, kind of like fun in a way. I didn't like the close order drill because I was always on the tail end being a short person and but anyway I got through it all. I enjoyed it.

Mr. Graham: Anything special happen there in boot camp that you might tell us about.

Mr. Steele: Well, we got where that every night after taps the Corporal, Drill Instructor Baker, he'd break us out and we'd have close order drill and we couldn't figure out why we were being punished after taps ever night. So they put it up on me to ask him and he said well, you've got a dirty platoon and we didn't know what he was talking about and so he told us who it was so what can we do about it. He said, well, take him down there and give him a bath, he don't wash his clothes either clean. So we took him out of his tent and took him down to the head after taps and we wanted him to take a bath and he wouldn't do it and he kind of got a little bit belligerent so we taken our GI brushes and give him a GI brush job but we never did have any trouble with him anymore about being clean and we didn't have to fall out for close order drill.

Mr. Graham: Where was your next movement after boot camp?

Mr. Steele: We went. While you're in boot camp you go out to Camp Matthews for rifle range to be taught how to shoot and what have you, of course, I already knew how

to shoot. Having grown up out in the country where you shot shotguns and rifles and stuff like that. But anyway we went through the rigors of going through all the sittings and the settings and what have you to shoot and then we finally got to fire some and then we fired for qualification and I was firing perfect up until we got to the 500-yard range and I had a misfire on my M-1 and so they called time on me and then they raised all the targets down there and I couldn't tell which one was my target and being a boot I fired on the wrong target and so I qualified but I would have got expert if I'd just had one target I know because I'd already hit the other target that I was shooting at. It was something else.

Mr. Graham: What happened after Camp Matthews?

Mr. Steele: Come back and graduated from boot camp and then I had drove a truck some during the summer hauling vegetables out of Florida and I told them I could drive a truck when we went in for muster when we first got to boot camp so I was carried across the parade ground there at San Diego and put over in transport. Went out to some national forest there south of San Diego to be trained as a truck driver or motor transport, and we went deer hunting and we'd shot a deer and we couldn't find it, we were trailing him, but anyway, got up on a rock to see where he was at and I fell off the rock and bummed up my knee. Went back in to San Diego hospital there at the base for a week and I come back and they had me ready to go to Fleet Marine Force at Camp? So I ended up at Camp? In Fleet Marine Force.

Mr. Graham: Ok, what happened after that?

Mr. Steele: At Camp? well, I run into some of the boys that were in boot camp and they said Bill, get in machine guns. All they do is sit up there in the room taking guns apart and put them back together. They don't do nothing. We have to walk, go out on marches every day, so that's what I did, but I got some misrepresentation cause two men had a cart you put the machine gun, Waterkoo-30 which weighed, the gun weighed 48 pounds, the tripod weighed 31 pounds and 26 box of ammunition and five gallons of water on that 2-wheel cart and you pulled it all over southern California. So that wasn't no big deal either. And you got in combat, the gunner carried the tripod and the assistant gunner carried the gun and that was no easy load of 51 pounds. Then we got our training done at Camp ? and we went out as a replacement battalion to overseas.

Mr. Graham: Ok. After that, then what happened?

Mr. Steele: Well, I went over as a replacement battalion with a bunch of other Marines, too, and Sailors on the west point one of the Matsonian liners and we landed at New Caledonia, unloaded, and then the next night, next evening we was put aboard the Monrovia and that ship carried us without escort down to New Zealand. And then I joined with the 2nd Marine Division there and went into M Company, 3rd Battalion 8th Marines as an ammunition carrier is what I was because they already

had their squads set up and everything but I qualified down there again as machine gunner and they trained us there and put us on a ship and sent us to Gilbert Islands.

Mr. Graham: And what happened at Gilbert Islands?

Mr. Steele: Well, the Gilbert Islands had a island there, named Betio and we called it Tarawa and that's where, we used alligators for the first time, I was not in one but we was supposed to go off ship but after bombardment well the Japanese fired our 8 inch cross side bow and all the troop ships pulled anchor and went about another mile out.

Mr. Graham: Now let me go back—you mentioned the first time you used alligators—now is that an amphibious craft that takes you

Mr. Steele: Amphibious craft that has those tracks on it that move through the water with those tracks and then when it got to land it could move on land and that was one of the first things. We was supposed to have much more in number that what we had but we didn't get but, I don't remember how many we got, cause I never was on any, either one of them, I was put in a boat, but there was a coral reef around there that you could get across of it in a Higgins boat loaded with troops if tide was in but if the tide was going out in the morning then the coral was up so it would scrape the bottom of the boat and you couldn't get across it. But the

alligators was to go in, drop off the Marines aboard, turn around and come back out to the coral reef and then the Marines was to change there if they couldn't get across the coral reef from the Higgins boat into the alligators and then they would transport them back to shore but they got so many of them shot up and banged up but I don't think but one or two was ever good enough to come back out to pick anybody up and when the cocks man and everything got to the coral, well they dumped the Marines out of the boat and the water was up waist deep some places where they had shellows? You'd go under head and foot and then a lot of Marines drowned because of that and then a lot of them was killed there in the water because you can just imagine walking ashore with a machine gun pointed at you shooting and any number of people told me different stories about how they got saved and everything. They got their head down just as close to the water as they could get and then walk and some of them would go underwater, hold their breath and go underwater and walk and then come back up and get an air and then go back down again. Myself, we went in a Higgins boat and we got put off at the end of the pier that come out from the island of Tarawa and we got put off on that. While I was aboard the Higgins boat coming in some type of shell, bullet or something, anyway, hit the steel on the Higgins boat and splattered the shrapnel and it just covered my face and looked like I'd been killing hogs or something blood all over it but anyway I wasn't evacuated and I was put off on the end of the pier.

Mr. Graham: Didn't injure your eyes though?

Mr. Steele: Didn't injure my eyes or anything like that but it was shrapnel just all over and the corpsmen picked it out and I wasn't evacuated there and I didn't know anything about getting wounded and getting a Purple Heart. Didn't know what that was, never heard of it you know and then went I got back to Tarawa they fell us out and they gave us

Mr. Graham: Tell us a little bit more about the Battle of Tarawa. When you guys hit the shore then what happened?

Mr. Steele: Well, we got ashore and the 16-inch guns from the Navy had done a pretty good job but they were no match to the bunkers that they had. They had walls on their bunkers six of eight foot wide, just a wall, and it was reinforced with concrete with rods of steel, wire mesh and 16 inch shells would bounce off of it and the top of them were vulnerable and that's where we blasted the holes in the top and dropped all the charges and everything down in it and killed most of the Japs down inside of there. The first night it was tiff and tuck in fact some of the people on the shore and some still aboard ship thought they was going to have to evacuate everybody because it just wasn't that much life we had no communications with ship to shore until later on. It was really in doubt the first night but the advantage that we found out was the shells that torn up the radio connections communications of the Japanese they had no communications as to what to do, now to do, and whatever and we found out the Japanese would, they

was supposed to go between two trees that's where they went and could go off to the side or anything and not get shot but they'd go between the two trees and that's the way that they were, the Americans if it was going to get shot there they'd go around it some other way. You didn't have to be told to not go around it, go through there, you'd go around it, you was going to be set for preservation. And it was a bloody battle there was a lot of people there that died there in the water coming ashore and that was the most thing that was so catastrophic about it was the fact that after it was secure you started off to come back aboard ship and ever and all the dead Marines floating in the water and then I've been told later on that out at sea the airplane pilots that were flying cover could see the bodies floating out to sea when the tide went out it took bodies out to sea. And then the bodies that floated out by the transports and so forth they put out people to pick those bodies up and bring them aboard and then they were buried at sea.

Mr. Graham: What was the casualty rate in the group that you were fighting in?

Mr. Steele: We didn't lose too many men in our machine gun, we was in machine gun company, and the way they did that, in the battalion, in the machine gun company, would take and they would have sections, two squads in each section and then the section would go with the rifle company as their rapid fire weapons and so we was scattered and we didn't lose too many men out of the M Company. I did know and I probably got it wrote down somewhere how many, but right now I don't recollect, but we didn't lose too many out of the M Company. I know I

lost one buddy from Patterson, New Jersey, he was killed and but the rest of them was just friends that I'd met through boot camp and training.

Mr. Graham: Well tell us more, how did the battle progress on until the island was taken over.

Mr. Steele: Well once we got enough men on there and enough, oh, we got some tanks on there and some flame throwers and some demolition people we got those where they could work, safe enough to where they could work and so it would just last only three days. 76 hours and we were all secure.

Mr. Graham: Was there anything unusual about the way the Japanese soldier himself fought?

Mr. Steele: Yes, these were, were their pride and joy Marines, their Japanese Marines.

Mr. Graham: Imperial Marines?

Mr. Steele: Imperial Marines is what they were and they were, uh, the General said they would take 100 years and a million years to take the island and we took it in 76 hours and it was a lot of flu-flus and everything but this opened up the alligator or that type of transportation to shore and then going on land that was modified and advanced in getting ashore and making it a lot safer in getting in.

Mr. Graham: Do you remember when it finally all ended, where were you at and what was everybody doing?

Mr. Steele: Well, most of us were wanting water because we was right on the equator and water was just something other you didn't have even though it was just three days and you was sweating all the time. And that's what everybody, when we got secure, whether we could get enough to go back to get water, that's the first thing we wanted was water and course most of us carried two canteens ashore and then the people that were killed and wasn't out in the ocean then we'd pick up their canteens and use that as a matter of water. But water was very essential.

Mr. Graham: And after the Campaign at Tarawa what happened to you then?

Mr. Steele: We was put back aboard transports and brought to Hilo, Hawaii and there we went by truck over the mountains up there to a little town called Kamuela and the Seabees were building us quarters there and it later became the name Camp Tarawa and that's where all the division was trained there to prepare to go to Saipan.

Mr. Graham: Tell us about Saipan.

Mr. Steele: Well, we didn't realize it but everything there in Hawaii that we would run all the different types of pillboxes we built and we would attack them and all that. We

didn't realize it but ever time we would go out on those working parties there for training we'd be going towards a mountain, Mauna Loa, Mauna Kea. Well, when we got, come out of the LSTs we come out on landing tanks there and they had a 75 millimeter cannon on there on that landing carrier and there was 12 people could get in there with that there and that's why I say they'd improved it so it was a lot better for tracking and it had a lot more armor on it than the Higgins boat had and they could come right in to shore and go right out across the land just like a tank would go. And hen we landed there the 1st Wave it was no resistance nobody was shooting at us, we went ashore, went in 150 yards to 200 yards, somewhere in that neighborhood and we killed one Jap and he looked like he'd been down there, drunk on Sake or something or other and he was bewildered or whatever unless the bombardment had shook him up. I don't know but anyway he was the only one we killed until we got to a railroad track and the Second Lieutenant that was in charge of us said we was on the wrong beach, we had to move down and he started moving us down this railroad track and us hollering at him we don't need to be on this railroad track, get us off, get us off. He said I know what I'm doing anyway shells started falling and it was 42 of us in the Platoon and there was 19 of us walked out of it. I got wounded myself in the left ankle and left leg and left hand but I wasn't immobile. They told me that Teel Taylor, which was a good friend of mine, he was with me, said that the shell hit between my feet and I went up in the air and he said I thought you was blowed half in two but when I come back to my senses I had sand all in my nose, ears,

mouth everywhere and so I got out of there and got over under a tree and a rice patty and I took over a machine gunner again.

Mr. Graham: And how did the battle go on Saipan, how did it finally end up?

Mr. Steele: Well, the second day on Saipan I was evacuated out to Merchant Marine ship and had the shrapnel dug out of me and put back ashore on the fourth night, fourth evening, and the fifth day I went back to the front lines on top of Mount Tappichaw (sp?). That was the name of the mountain there on Saipan. We just kept on pushing and it was a lot of in-fighting and close in-fighting with the Japanese but our Marines were well trained and stayed close in order and did a wonderful job of annihilating people.

Mr. Graham: Was there much hand-to-hand fighting there?

Mr. Steele: There was close quarters. I never saw anybody actually kill a Jap with a bayonet or anything like that but it was close enough that if they'd of kept on coming before they shot them they would have had to stick them with a bayonet. I saw that, and the machine gunners; we stayed, generally, off the front lines, stayed behind and we fired cover fire. We would fire over their heads while they were advancing going up and then they would direct us where to fire in case there was a bunch up in a certain area. But in the mountains you can't do that too good and most of the time you wasn't 25-30 feet behind the rifle in going over the mountain there and then when we got down to Gerpan, that was on the plain, we got pushed

out, went back in reserve and they come down with attack and run over, overrun the Army, and overrun the 10th Marines Artillery. Then we had to go back up and take that back and then we set up front lines. Machine gun on the front lines, what we done was we'd be on the front lines at night, and we'd put up a protective line and that would be firing cross in front of all the troops, one, two guns one firing to the right and the other one firing to the left. Right gun fired to the left and the left gun fired to the right and it put a cross fire there that you could hardly get through. The island was, I don't remember how long it took, I did know, but I don't remember that but then we come back in Bibwack and we was probably in Bibwack no more than 10 days and we was put aboard ship and went over to Tinian Islands and invaded it.

Mr. Graham: Well, this is your third invasion, how did you feel about that?

Mr. Steele: Well, I'd been wounded the first time at Tarawa, and I'd been wounded the second time at Saipan and when I got aboard that ship and got ready to get off the next morning—they always feed you steak and eggs, it's like a death guy, a guy going to his death in the electric chair or something other, and they feed you steak and eggs about 4 o'clock in the morning and I was scared to death cause it was the third campaign and I just urinated all over myself. I mean that's how scared I was, shaking and everything but once I got ashore that all left and I was all right once I got ashore. The first night on Tinian we, in our section, where we landed

we killed more air people of the Japanese, pilots and air crewmen and what have you I guess mechanics and what have you than anything else.

Mr. Graham: Explain why that happened—why you were killing more of them.

Mr. Steele: Well, they didn't have no, that's where the airfield was on that end for the fighters to go off and so all the planes was shot up and so they was just left there and they had on the big old dungarees flying suit and what have you and that's the way we knew they was Air Force. They didn't have no steel emblems just had the regular old flat leather, flat caps.

Mr. Graham: Was there anything very important about capturing that airstrip?

Mr. Steele: Yes, it was very important. Once we got across the island and had swung around to clear out everything on our left flank and started down the island with our front line all the way across it they started building a fence down on the end of the island and we thought they was building a fence to put the civilians on that was supposed to be on the island. There was between 20,000-30,000 civilians on Saipan that was put in barricades or stockades. But we found out much later that, in fact, I was home when it happened, that that is where the island was prepared for the Gay to fly off of to drop the first atomic bomb.

Mr. Graham: It was very significant in capturing.

Mr. Steele: Very significant, but we didn't know what was going on. We didn't know anything about the Manhattan project or atomic bomb or anything like that.

Mr. Graham: You hear any stories, especially stories about the loading of the atomic bomb on that

Mr. Steele: Well, we found out, I found out from a buddy of mine that went back there in '94 that to load the atomic bomb on the B-29 they had to dig a hole in the runway, put the bomb down in it, roll the plane over it, and then lift the bomb up out of that hole up into the airplane. And the others they just always rolled them up there and put them on the racks and raised them up in there but not the atomic bomb.

Mr. Graham: So, in other words, Saipan was pretty well closed out and then after that what happened to you?

Mr. Steele: We was 3rd Battalion 8th Marines which I was in we was left as bibwack there to clear up the island. A sniper had fired close to the Colonel, or Lt. Col. I think it was in charge of the Army Air Defense that was coming in on the island and he put all his men back on the ships and we had to go over to the island again and re-secure the island. But in the meantime the Navy gave orders that all who had been wounded twice or more or so run down with malaria and so forth they be sent home, so me being wounded twice I got on the list. I could have gone home

because I was not disabled in any way you know whatsoever but I took advantage of it to go on home. I got home December 7, 1944.

Mr. Graham: Where was that? Pennsylvania?

Mr. Steele: I went, I come home, and then I went down to Pensacola Naval Air Station at the Marine barracks there and went in motor transport there driving a guard truck 24 on, 24 off and about six weeks after I was there they had an opening in the barbershop and I volunteered for it and I didn't know how to cut hair.

_____ I told I could hair as long as it lasted.

All I'd done out in the city was cut hair with a scissors and comb but anyway in a little while I was able to give a GI haircut and that's where I stayed although in June, 1945 they was getting us ready to go back to the Pacific and then when they dropped the atomic bomb well, then we was tickled to death about that. Fact, I have some friends that I made acquaintance with in the Submarine Divisions Association that were on board ship headed for Japan when the bombs were dropped.

Mr. Graham: Well, tell me, you know I know you mentioned you had a buddy from New Jersey and you had one somewhere else, so it seems like the Marine Corps has a real close camaraderie regardless of where you were born from that everybody was pretty close. Is that correct?

Mr. Steele: That's right, and that's why even right now, here at Fredericksburg, uh, I live in Tennessee and I met the people from the Texas chapter at other places and I'm down here now to visit with them and be here with them and it's about 900 miles of driving to get down here and you pay your own expense, you don't get no money for that you have to pay your own expense where ever you go. But my wife was in the WACS and she was stationed at San Antonio and then an ambulance run over her and she got kicked out in May of 1945 but I'm going down there after I leave here. This is Saturday; I'm going down there tomorrow and spend a couple of days.

Mr. Graham: Do you have any special jobs that you do with the Marines right now?

Mr. Steele: Yes, in '96 I was voted in as Adjutant for the 2nd Marine Division Association and on the National staff and I've had that since 1996, and I enjoy it. I do all the minutes writing, correspondence, set up meetings, stuff like that. Since I lost my wife in October '92 well then this has made me free to go here, yonder, and wherever I want to go.

Mr. Graham: If you were to make a statement now to all of the young people up and growing about the importance of World War II is there any particular thing you would say to them?

Mr. Steele:

Well, to me personally, it was involvement in a war that was undeclared on us, and to young people of today that have grown up in the age that we live now, I grew up poor, had to put pasteboard in my shoes to have to keep walking from on the ground. But now they've grown up with that and they have so many computers and televisions and radios and phonographs and all of that, they should appreciate that because their forefathers and even my forefathers made a sacrifice that this nation would never have to speak Japanese. It would never have to speak Japanese. And young people today are still involved in good things—good things. We just had our meeting at Denver, Colorado. The people there that had the reunion, in charge of it, they went around to all the high schools and asked them if they would like to come and sing the songs that we grew up with in the '40s and different songs that people sung and began and began all the songs that different people put out and they didn't even know them but they learned them and they came and entertained us at Denver from the high schools and it was so many volunteers they had to run the lottery to see who was going to come. Now that makes you feel good.

Mr. Graham:

That's right.

Mr. Steele:

Makes you feel good and there's still good young people out there. I praise them everywhere.

Mr. Graham: Well Bill I've asked you some questions now about what maybe we'd want to hear. Is there anything that you would like to close out with about your whole experience in World War II or now or whatever?

Mr. Steele: Well, the Marine Corps taught me discipline. I already had discipline, uh, my grandmother saw to that. I said darn one time and she washed out my mouth with oxen soap. Homemade oxen soap. So I never used profanity until I got wrinkled. But the Marine Corps made me closer to a family tie because having grown up from 11 years old on my own I didn't have the father and mother looking over me and my shoulder but my raising up by my grandmother and grandfather gave me the basis to grow on and the Marine Corps has been like a home to me. Any number of people that I've gotten acquainted with come out after World War II went back in because they didn't like it outside. Marine Corps was home to them. It's no comparison, but I read in the paper now where convicts come out of prison, been in there for 20 or 30 years and they'll do something to get back in because they can't stand it out here, and that's ridiculous. But the Marine Corps has been good to me and I enjoy what I do now. Don't get no pay but

Mr. Graham: Not money, you don't get any pay, but you get a lot of fun.

Mr. Steele: I get a lot of fun; I meet a lot of people. I met some here that I never seen before, somebody from Lubbock, Texas. I never seen them before, they're first-timers here and I meet people everywhere. I never met a stranger in my life. If he

doesn't want to talk to me I go on but if he wanted to talk we could always find something to talk about.

Mr. Graham: Well, Bill, I first of all, on behalf of the Nimitz Museum really want to thank you for this, you've given us really a beautiful story in the fact that it is told just how wonderful and honorable the Marine Corps is and how much it has done for this country, the wonderful men that not only died but the wonderful men that have survived and this documentation, I can assure you, will be appreciated very much by a lot of people.

Mr. Steele: One final thing I forgot. I belong to the 2nd Marine Division Association and we furnish scholarships, this year we have 41 scholarships, giving \$1,000 each to help them further their education to all of the children of Marines that need it.

Mr. Graham: That's great.

Mr. Steele: That's one of the good things that the Association does each year.

Mr. Graham: Ok, Bill, unless you have something else to say, then

Mr. Steele: No, just Semper Fi. Semper Fi.

Mr. Graham: Thank you, Bill.

Mr. Steele: Thank you.

-End of tape-

Transcribed by Bonnie Jenschke
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