

*Admiral Nimitz Historic Site
National Museum of the Pacific War*

Center for Pacific War Studies

Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with

Mr. Richard Russell

(World War II - U.S. Marines - Guadalcanal)

Date of Interview: May 11, 2001

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Today is September 26, 2002. I am interviewing Mr. Dick Russell. The interview is taking place at Fredericksburg, Texas, at the National Museum of the Pacific War. This interview is in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies, Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Parks and Wildlife for the preservation of historical information related to this site.

Mr. Metzler: Mr. Russell, welcome to Fredericksburg, Texas. I would like to turn it over to you now and have you give us some of your background, and then take us into your experiences.

Mr. Russell: Thank you very much. My name is Richard H. Russell, more commonly known as Dick. I was born in Canada on August 7, 1922, and my parents moved to the Detroit, Michigan area about six years later. So I became a citizen at that time. I attended school in the Detroit area, and after high school I went to Adrian College for a year and a half. That ended with Pearl Harbor, which was December 7, 1941. I left school and on January 7, 1942, and I joined the Marine Corps. I went to Boot Camp at Paris Island.

Mr. Metzler: Did you volunteer or were you drafted?

Mr. Russell: I volunteered and became part of the regular Marine Corps. As I said, I went to Paris Island Boot Camp, and after Boot Camp, about March of 1942, I was assigned to the 1st Marine Division and moved to Norfolk, Virginia. On Easter Day we boarded a transport and went down through the Panama Canal, and had a nice 30-day cruise to Samoa. The entire 7th Marines went to Samoa because there was danger of the Japanese going that far. We garrisoned those islands. That was a very enjoyable experience. We had a nice time. There was no combat and the people were nice. On

August 7th the 1st Division left the 7th Regiment and invaded Guadalcanal. We stayed on Samoa. About the 1st of September we left Samoa. We boarded ship and headed for Guadalcanal to reinforce the rest of the division. The trip to the Canal was quite an experience because we traveled mostly by night, and in the daytime we dodging different islands. When we got into New Hebrides we saw an aircraft carrier there with a great big hole in its hull. That was rather interesting because at this point we had not seen any combat.

Mr. Metzler: Do you know which aircraft carrier that was?

Mr. Russell: No, I do not know which one it was. It must have taken us two weeks to reach the Canal. I'm really not sure of the time because we were just dodging in and out of islands.

Mr. Metzler: The canal means Guadalcanal?

Mr. Russell: Yes. We finally landed there somewhere around the 18th of September. After we got there – the people there had really gone through two extreme battles that I know of. For the most part we were patrolling. We would go out on reconnaissance patrols. It was hot there and we would get a lot of rain, and on these patrols sometimes you would just feel like collapsing because the heat was so intense. The first part of October we went to engage the enemy. The 5th Marines and some other troops that I don't know exactly who they were, they were going to make an advance on the Matanikau River. The others in "E" Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines and our Battalion's job was to cross the river upstream and go [I don't know how far], but it was many hundreds of yards beyond that river. We were to go in and then drive straight to the ocean to cut off any of the Japs that might decide to retreat.

Mr. Metzler: What was the name of this river?

Mr. Russell: Matanikau. So we were to go behind the enemy and drive to the ocean. Our 1st Battalion, I was in the 2nd Battalion, the 1st Battalion was to go

several hundred yards beyond us and drive to the ocean because we knew there was another group of Japs behind this, which were the reserves. I don't know how we knew this; I was a Private and the Generals had that information, not us. Anyway, they took the drive to the ocean. So, the thing went fine. We started driving and we had numerous casualties mainly from snipers. Then we ran into either some artillery or mortar, probably mortar, and we had a lot of casualties there. We lost our Company Commander and our gunnery sergeant, which was our highest enlisted man in the company, and several of the other headquarters people because a mortar landed right in amongst them. I cannot tell you the exact number of casualties. Anyway, we drove to the ocean. That bunch of Japanese that were trapped between us and the 1st Battalion were engaged by the 1st Battalion. They had quite a battle with them. Eventually, that entire group of Japanese was wiped out. I think we were there one or two days, and finally we had orders to go for the ocean and give up our lines. I don't remember how we got out of that. I don't know if we marched back to the front lines – I just don't remember. I do remember this though, we had a couple of destroyers out there that were firing on either side of our lines. They were firing on the right and left of us to give us cover so that we could get out of there. There were still a lot of Japanese there. That was the end of that little fracas. After that we went back to patrolling. Several weeks later, probably toward the third week of October, we were on this place called "Edison's Ridge" or "Bloody Ridge." They had a big battle there before we got there. Edison's Raiders were the ones that defended that. We were not on the island at that time. Anyway, we were up on the Ridge – the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 7th Marines, and our battalion was ordered to leave there and let the 1st Battalion defend that ridge alone because there was another bunch of Japanese coming down between there and the Matanikau River. We left and took up positions on that ridge. About the second night that we were on that ridge the Japanese

struck. We didn't have many casualties, but F Company got hit with a large number of Japanese and they broke through the line and got behind us. Our Executive Officer, Major Connolly, gathered a group together and a Sergeant from H Company – our machine guns and mortars were in a separate company and assigned to the rifle company at that time.

Mr. Metzler: So you were in the rifle company?

Mr. Russell: Yes, I was in the rifle company. There were a bunch of machine guns in that particular area where the Japanese broke through. Connolly got together, and he with Sergeant Page, got cooks and everybody else they could, and pushed back and got them off of there. I didn't witness this; I just know that it did happen. Sergeant Page ended up receiving the Congressional Medal of Honor as a result of that action. He ended up retiring as a Colonel from the Marine Corps. Just after the breakthrough, the enemy down there, the Japs, were kind of scattered down there. We stayed there for several days, and I went down one time to get some water and when I was coming back I could see one area where the Japs were with a machine gun and about six others. Also, as I say, while I was coming back with that water a Japanese bomber had been up above us and it got shot down. He came down in flames right in front of us. I thought he was going to land right on top of us. He landed several hundred yards from us.

Mr. Metzler: So he crashed?

Mr. Russell: Yes, just crashed. There was an explosion, etc. So that battle ended and we went back behind the front lines and resumed our normal patrol. Our job there was constant patrol. Our front lines were three or four miles along the coast, and maybe a mile or two inland, and that is all we had of this great, big island.

Mr. Metzler: We really only had a "toe hold" at that time.

Mr. Russell: That is all we ever really had on the island. That is all that we could defend. Of course we had the airfield, and that is why we landed there – to take that airfield. As I said, we were constantly patrolling. That is the

way we defended it – to find out where the Japanese were. The third battle that I was involved in occurred shortly after the first part of November. We had word, and again, I'm a Private, and the Generals had this information – not me, but we were informed that the Japanese were going to land east of our lines something like 15 miles. Our battalion got the job of going out and stopping the landing – meeting them at the shoreline. We went out and marched along that sandy beach for about 15 miles. I tell you that was terrible; marching in that loose sand. We were kind of beat up anyway.

Mr. Metzler: And it was hot...

Mr. Russell: And it was hot! Anyway, we get out there and we dig in the sand. The ships came in and they landed on our right. There was a small river just on our right, and they landed on the right of us on the other side of that little river. I say river – it was about 20 feet across – something like that. So they made their landing and we didn't get to engage them, but F Company did, and they were on that flank along the river and they did meet some of them. They had a rifle fight with a few of them and then we were ordered to withdraw. We pulled back, I don't know how far, but we pulled well back and there were what seemed to be 37mm shells being fired at us. Perhaps they were mortars – I don't know for sure. Anyway, they were shelling us. Our radios went out, so we couldn't contact headquarters. At least that is the story that I was given. So we did this from a distance, and finally in the middle of the day we called for air support. They came in, but they strafed us rather than the Japs. Fortunately their aim was bad because we didn't have a casualty as a result of that. Anyway, the engagement stopped. Our 1st Battalion was called to join us. At this time a battalion consisted of about 1,000 men. I guess at this time we had 400 or 500 men because of casualties caused by enemy fire and from malaria. There was a lot of malaria there. So they joined us, and they were to establish a line coming from the ocean inland and we went inland and went around the

Japanese and got on the other side of them. We were going to drive into them. There was a battalion of Army that was supposed to come out and block the inland portion. We were going to form a line to the ocean, driving from the east to the west, and the 1st Battalion was going to stay on the western front, and the Army was going to guard the inland portion. So we went around the back and did drive from our side and engaged them in a battle on a lagoon, small river, etc. It was a body of water about ten feet wide. We got into quite a rifle fight with them. We suffered numerous casualties. Just a matter of interest – our Lieutenant in charge of our platoon got up and said, “We are going to cross that river.” Just as he got up and said that he was hit and went down. So our platoon sergeant took over our platoon and we did cross the river and we continued. There were a bunch of them up in the trees also and so our machine guns were breaking those trees to eliminate that part. We didn’t get them all. Some were able to escape inland. That battle lasted from very early in the morning through most of the day, I guess it was the middle of the afternoon. They brought out some hot chow for us.

Mr. Metzler: I guess hot chow was a bit unusual out there.

Mr. Russell: Out there yes because we had been living on K Rations and C Rations. This is just a matter of interest. We were sitting and eating this chow and somebody got hold of one of these Japanese machine guns. There is a big difference between a Japanese machine gun and one of ours as far as sound is concerned. We had just about finished our chow fortunately. I had laid my rifle about ten feet away from me. Somebody was just playing with this Japanese machine gun and let off quite a few bursts of it. I thought that it was Japanese with that gun. My chow went flying and I went for my rifle. That was the end of my chow. I had eaten most of it by that time. It was one of the humorous things that happen in the midst of a battle.

Mr. Metzler: Did you get your hands on that guy that was firing the Japanese machine gun?

Mr. Russell: I never knew who did it. Then afterwards I was called to security by the people that were going to pick up the bodies, so I had to go back across that river with them. Nothing happened, we were just there in case we were needed. I don't know how many bodies that we recovered on the other side of the river. These were of our own, but there were a lot of casualties on both sides of the river. We left the dead Japs. We got on Higgins boats and that was the end of the battle as far as I was concerned. Several of us were called upon to take the Army out on patrol. It was interesting because we were quite certain there were no Japanese there and we could be bolder and perhaps we showed off a little bit in front of the Army because they were untested.

Mr. Metzler: You had a chance to impress them a little bit?

Mr. Russell: Yes. We did several patrols like that. After that we just hung around the island; the Army took over and we stayed on that island until the end of the year – probably the first week of January.

Mr. Metzler: Did you get any exposure to other Allied soldiers – Australians or any others while you were there at Guadalcanal?

Mr. Russell: We did run into one group of Australians. We saw them when we were out on patrol one time. We were never with them in combat though. I just saw them. We did go down to Melbourne, Australia. I had a wonderful time. You have to remember that we were pretty well decimated at this time. Let me back up a little – we went to the cemetery just before we left and paid our respects to those that didn't make it.

Mr. Metzler: The cemetery at Guadalcanal?

Mr. Russell: Yes, the cemetery at Guadalcanal. We had a lot of replacements that came in all of the time. When we were standing there at the cemetery in formation one of the fellows counted the number of original ones of us that landed on there. He counted some 20 percent of the 200. Some of those were malaria cases. They were not all battle casualties, but it was a high percentage.

Mr. Metzler: Did you feel blessed that you survived?

Mr. Russell: Yes, that I was part of that 20 percent. So we got on a ship and went down to Melbourne and spent nine months down there. The people there were wonderful to us. We had a lot of liberties, and then late in August/September we had to get back to the tropical islands.

Mr. Metzler: What type of housing did you have in Melbourne? What was the weather like in Melbourne?

Mr. Russell: Melbourne is a temperate climate. We were there in January and that is their summer. June/July is their winter. It wasn't really too cold. There was no snow. After we got back and organized, etc., in September we got back aboard ship and went up to New Guinea. This was "friendly" New Guinea – places that had been captured. We were staging there to invade New Britain. We went up there in September, and on Christmas Day in the U.S., which was December 26th there, we landed on Cape Gloucester.

Mr. Metzler: This would be '43?

Mr. Russell: Yes, that was 1943. Had a nice day on Cape Gloucester. Well, we landed and drove in about a mile. We had one man hit and we stopped and dug in. We stayed at those positions for four or five days, and then we went a little bit further and established better positions for our left flank in a river bed. I was there nine days and we didn't have any action. I could hear different action along the line, but right in front of me there was no action until the eighth day. They had come within 30-40 feet of our lines without our knowledge. Then they charged our line with fixed bayonets, yelling and screaming and firing wildly as they charged. We nailed them quickly, but they reached about ten feet from us before the last of them fell. It was not much of a battle as it lasted only a few minutes, but it was rather exciting while it lasted. We lost only one man to their wild firing. Then, after that, not knowing what was going to happen, I was sitting in my fox hole with my feet on the edge (sitting on top of the hole), and my head between my legs – just searching and being very alert. As I was doing that, either a

mortar or an artillery shell landed right in front of me and smacked me in the knee. Fortunately, my head was between my knees then. I was very lucky, but it got me in the knee and knocked me back into my hole. I didn't even know I was hit because the concussion was so great. For some reason I reached down and touched my knee, pulled my hand back and it was all bloody. I said, "I've been hit!" The corpsman came over and dressed my wound and I went back to an aid station and then evacuated from the island. I went over to New Guinea on an LST (Ambulance Ship), and then from New Guinea I was flown to Brisbane, Australia, and I was hospitalized there in an Army Hospital for months. (I lose track of time in that hospital). They dressed me with just a cast; put my leg in a cast. I was that way and was not walking for several months. Then they determined that it wasn't doing the job, so they decided they needed to remove that shrapnel out of my knee, which they did. Since I was in an Army Hospital they had to send me back to the Marine Corps to determine what they were going to do to me. They flew me back to Guadalcanal, which was by now very secure. I was surprised. We had two small strips before, and by this time now it was a very large air base. Anyway, they flew me back there and then they put me on a ship and was sent over to the Russell Islands, which is where the 1st Marine Division was stationed. That was our rest camp, if you could call it that because it was a fairly miserable island. I reported to the Company and they sent me to the Doctor. The Doctor said they were staging and getting ready to do Peleliu in September. This was the latter part of August. The Doctor said that I could not go. I didn't argue with him.

Mr. Metzler: So, this would be in 1944.

Mr. Russell: Yes, this would be 1944. I think September 15th they landed on Peleliu, but I was sent back to the U.S. I was sent to Camp Perry, Virginia. Then they decided that they didn't need me any more. A month before the end of the war I was discharged.

Mr. Metzler: How were you transported back to the States – on a troop ship or something?

Mr. Russell: Yes.

Mr. Metzler: Well, that is an interesting story that you have. What is probably your most emotional memory of that whole period when you were in combat and in the islands?

Mr. Russell: Probably the battle that I have just mentioned because its getting pretty personal. All of the others are still local fights. We saw a little bit of the enemy, but not much.

Mr. Metzler: There, you saw the “whites” of their eyes.

Mr. Russell: That is correct – and the yellow of their skin. That would have to be the most emotional, most scary, or whatever words you want to give to it.

Mr. Metzler: On the other side of the coin, what is the most humorous recollection that you have of your time over there?

Mr. Russell: I mentioned one and that strikes me as the most humorous.

Mr. Metzler: This is the one where the Japanese machine gun was put on fire by one of the GI's. You lost your chow as a result. What about your Commanding Officers? What do you remember about them? Were you close to any of them – had respect for them?

Mr. Russell: I was not close to them, no, because Marine Corps protocol kept you from being close to them. The Colonel in charge of our Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Hanneken, first name was Harold or Howard (I'm not sure), but he was a Congressional Medal of Honor Winner in Nicaragua. That was long before the war of course, and he was one that I think everybody respected. Our Major Connolly was fine. Some of the 2nd Lieutenants left a little bit to be desired. On Guadalcanal we only had two Lieutenants. I told you about one. We had a Lieutenant who replaced him, and as I mentioned we were through with combat and were just patrolling, this new Lieutenant was up there trying to tell us what to do. We knew what to do, and one of my good friends who later got killed in Peleliu, a guy by the name of Bob

Garvey, he used some profanity that I won't repeat, but he said, in effect, "Why don't you get your ass back where you belong." That was rather humorous because we just didn't talk to Lieutenants that way, but he was to exasperated with him that he just flew off the handle. Anyway, the guy went back there; went back where he belonged and didn't give us any more trouble.

Mr. Metzler: Did you have any close buddies or special friends that you made. You mentioned one just in passing. Are you still in contact with him?

Mr. Russell: This one I mentioned was killed in Peleliu. I had another good friend, Frank Neff, and he was also killed on Peleliu. No, I have contact with none of them. As a matter of fact, I have a roster of our Company from the Canal. It shows that were there and those killed. I went through that fairly recently, and tried to trace names of people. It was 200 people, and you get to know them pretty well. You know, when you've been with them that long. I had a hard time placing faces with their names. Several of them are dead.

Mr. Metzler: That was a long time ago too.

Mr. Russell: Yes it was.

Mr. Metzler: What about contacts with back home; with family and friends during that period you were in the islands?

Mr. Russell: I was single then. I think I was 19 years old at the time. I wrote to my Mother regularly.

Mr. Metzler: You received regular mail that they managed to get there?

Mr. Russell: Well, yes, but I wouldn't say regularly. When a ship would come in there would be mail on it. You might get two or three letters at one time, but that wasn't a problem to us. We had more important things to worry about than the mail.

Mr. Metzler: Did you ever actually have any contact with the Japanese, other than in combat, or seeing bodies of the Japanese, such as in combat, or as POW's, etc?

Mr. Russell: Most of those prisoners that we took on the Canal were Koreans. I think they were laborers on the airfield.

Mr. Metzler: Oh, that had been pressed into service by the Japanese?

Mr. Russell: That I believe to be true. I wouldn't swear to that, but I believe that was true. No, I had no contact with the Japanese.

Mr. Metzler: What is your opinion of the medical care that you received when you were hospitalized? Any experiences in the hospital that you would want to relate? How was that?

Mr. Russell: No problem with the hospital. I couldn't comment one way or another. Everybody took care of me fine.

Mr. Metzler: They got you all fixed up? You don't have any problems now with your knee?

Mr. Russell: I don't have any real problems. Just getting older and when it rains a little arthritis flairs up a little, but no real problem.

Mr. Metzler: What was the return home like? Was it what you expected it to be, or were there any surprises?

Mr. Russell: Well, when I came home the war wasn't over with yet. We came home and landed at Camp Pendleton in San Diego, which is a Marine base. I stayed there about two days. That was about Thanksgiving time. Then they put me on a troop train that was going cross-country. I was from the Detroit area and one fellow who had a bunch of drinks on the train and he said, "Boy, it sure feels good waking up feeling bad in the morning."

Mr. Metzler: Nothing like a good hang-over considering what you had been through.

Mr. Russell: That's right. I got to Chicago, and then took another train to Detroit, met my family. Of course there were just my Mother and Father there. Well, my sister was there. My other brothers were in the service too.

Mr. Metzler: And, after the war you returned to civilian life, got married and had a family.

Mr. Russell: I didn't go back to school though, which I probably should have done. I went into the insurance business and was fairly successful.

Mr. Metzler: Do you remember when you heard that the war was over. Where were you and how did you feel?

Mr. Russell: That was my first day at work. I went to work for an insurance company in downtown Detroit. I got there about 8:30 in the morning and I think it was about noontime when the announcement came that the war was over. That was the end of work for that day for everybody.

Mr. Metzler: That was a big celebration. Are there any other recollections or comments that you would like to make here.

Mr. Russell: I think I told you about everything I can. It is one of those things that you wouldn't want to have to do again, but you wouldn't trade the experience for anything. I think my experiences in the Marine Corps did a lot for me. The discipline in the Marine Corps was great. Those Drill Instructors were tough guys, but they taught us real discipline. I was 19 years old and I needed that. That served me very well when we had to face combat and when we had to face tough ordeals other than combat. You were taught to face tough situations, stick it out, and do it. It just served me well, I think even through the rest of my life. I hate war, but the Marine Corps experience was a wonderful one. I say that I hate war, I don't own a gun now. I haven't since the war was over, and I won't. That was enough. I think I've told you about all I can.

Mr. Metzler: Thank you for your time. We appreciate it.

Tape 672

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