



Fredericksburg, Texas

Center for Pacific War Studies

Presents
An Interview with:
Leo Schmittgens
1st Marines
Okinawa

Interview with
Mr. Leo Schmittgens

Mr. Morris: This is Cork Morris. Today is October 25, 2003, and I'm interviewing Mr. Schmittgens. This interview is taking place at the Nimitz Museum in Fredericksburg, Texas.

I would like to start with a little background, such as where you are from and where you were born.

Mr. Schmittgens: I'm from South St. Louis, Missouri, a German community. They scrub the streets every night, just like Fredericksburg. I joined the Marines April 5, 1944. They put me on a train and sent me to San Diego, California. From San Diego I went to boot camp, then to Camp Pendleton and joined Line Camp for training. I was trained as a mortar man, 81mm mortar man. After that we boarded ship and headed for someplace that we didn't know, as they didn't tell us. When we got overseas they woke us up one morning, and I went topside, looked out and there was Guadalcanal. We were coming down the slot which is known as Iron Bottom Bay. We kept on going and went to a place called Pavuvu in the Russell Islands. I thought I was going South, but we were going North, because South of the Equator things get all screwed up for anybody who lived the Northern Hemisphere all their lives. We got there and pulled into this lagoon where there was a steel pier. We asked them what is the name of this place, and we thought they said FUFU, but it was Pavuvu in the Russell Islands. From what I know of that area Pavuvu was one island in this group, another island was Banica. I think that's where 109 had its port, PT-109, Kennedy's boat, and that was North of Guadalcanal. The Shortland Island were further North and that's where Kennedy did all that patrolling.

We stayed there, but the Division wasn't there at the time. We joined the 1st Marine Division, but they were not there, they were at Peleliu. They came back and the contingent of Marines there, were 50% Guadalcanal veterans. They went home, and we were the ones that relieved them. We trained with the remnants of the division that were left there after Peleliu. We went to Guadalcanal and we trained there, then came back and got aboard ship and took off and went to rendezvous area in the Ulithi Atoll in the Carolines.

While we were there, we woke up one morning, went topside and the Carrier Franklin was there right next to us docked in the lagoon. They had just come back from up around Okinawa. That's where the ship had been bombed, hit with Kamikazes two or three times. It was devastated, looked like a rusty hulk. You see all the pictures where they show it was bombed two or three times. From there the ship went all the way up through the Panama Canal and up into New York. That thing had holes all in it. It looked like a rusted bucket.

From there the whole convoy got together and we went to Okinawa in March of '45. We never knew where we were going. They never told us until after we left Ulithi. Our destination was Okinawa, March, 1945. We got to Okinawa and we were anchored way off shore, we couldn't even see the coast. The ~~first~~ regiments of the 1st Marine Division was 5th, 7th, 1st, and 11th. The 11th was the artillery, 1st, 5th and 7th were the infantry regiments. Being that the 1st Regiment was the assault regiment of Peleliu, they sort of switched around for the next operation. So instead of the 1st and the 5th, the 5th and the 7th were the assault regiments. We were supposed to land the next day, but about noon they said you are going to disembark and take off. And I thought the shit hit the fan.

So they put us in Higgins boats and we took off. We got about a quarter of mile from the beach and the tide was out. So we had to wade ashore in hip high water carrying all our gear, but prior to getting off the LCM, I was listening to the radio. And it said, "this is Pig Iron Seven, we're fourteen hundred yards inland." I thought to myself, we thought the shit hit the fan, and they had to put reinforcements in to take over, but the landing was unopposed. What they did for us, they put us on the beach as fast as possible because the Kamikazes were giving them trouble. They didn't want the Kamikazes to hit one ship and there's a whole battalion which would be lost. You lose a thousand men. So that was the reason, we were safer on the beach.

About 1600 we hit the beach and we didn't start moving out for another hour. About dusk we were moving across the South end of Yon Ton Airfield and a Jap Zero came over, circled around and landed. It wasn't until 45 years later at a Marine Reunion I found out what happened to the pilot and his plane. Easy Company was on our flank at the Northern end of the airport; and when the pilot got out of his plane and stepped on it's wing, looked at this watch, and everybody shot him. I guess he thought the Japs still were in control of the island. Anyway he knew the exact time of his demise.

We went in and it took us about two days to catch up with the forward echelon. We went across the island and run into a few firefights and stragglers, but it wasn't nothing to worry about. The Army swung South, the 27th, the 7th, the 77th and the 96th, went South and the 6th Marine Division went North. The 6th Division ran into a lot of pockets of resistance in the Northern part of Okinawa. The part of Okinawa where we landed, the main force of the 10th Army was about three quarters of the way down to the Southern end. We went across, and it took us ~~three~~ days. The 6th Marine Division went North and they ran into more stiff opposition. The first month all we did was patrol around the area.

There was show every night with the Kamikazes. We had search lights and guns were shooting. It looked like the 4th of July. It was something to see but I would hate to be on the receiving end out there on the ships.

Mr. Morris: Were they pretty much just doing naval targets and notland targets?

Mr.Schmittgens: None what so ever. So we stayed there for a while and the Army lost practically all of their tanks. The Marines had a diffent method of protecting things. They protected with a squad on the outside, because the Japs would run out and put satchel charges and destroy or disable the tanks. The Marines protected the outside of the tank with a squad of Marines. You can do most anything, like sneak up on it and climb up on the top of it. They could use a Molotov cocktail like they did in Russia. TheArmy wanted our tanks, which was the 1st Tank Battalion, and General Geiger said, "You don't get the tanks unless you ger the Marines."

So they sent the1st Marine Division down to the West coast, a line north of Naha, and we relieved the 27th Army Division. Then later on, the 6th Marin Divison came down to help us. We moved over to the center and moved South, over one ridge after another. It ook about six or eight weeks to win the battle.

On numerous ocassions when we'd set up our mortars and the Japs would zero in on us, hitting the trees above and causing a lot of injuries to our men, we would move to another position as soon as they started firing on us. We were blessed,lucky.

Mr.Morris: These were the guys who were all dug way back in the caves?

MR.Schmittgnes: You never saw a Jap, as they were in a cave and would shoot out at you. I remember the first position when we set our mortars, we went around this ridge to secure it and make sure everything was fine. We set the mortars up and zeroed them on the line and pretty soon here comes a sailor. He had a white hat on, cut-off blue shirt and dungarees, and said,"Oh my God, my buddy got shot". And we said, "what the hell are you doing here?" He said they were souvenir hunting. I said, "You're on the front lines." So we went around and got his buddy, and he had gotten shot as he passed by a cave. He got shot right in the stomach. To this day, I wondered what kind of story he told his grandchildren.

We moved over to the beach. We were rotated off the lines. We were about 25 yards from the beach above a seawall. Set our guns up as we always did, zeroed in on our lines in case they needed some help. About 1:00 AM all hell broke loose. We were getting fire from Navy Picket Boats who were patrolling up and down the beach beyond the reef. They observed Japanese barges coming North and were firing on these barges. The Japs wanted to land behind our lines. They came ashore and moved inland about 50 yards South of us and F Company, 2nd Batallon met them with machine gun fire and the amphibian tank batallion came along out of nowhere along the beach and were firing at them. It went on all night long until daybreak. We tried to get nosey to find out what was going on but our Lt. wouldn't let us leave our position. We were pinned down by Navel fire and couln't use our weapons - had no target. But in the morning some Japs were pinned down behind the seawall about 300 or 400 YARDS South of us along the beach, and we were able to fire on them with our mortars. They said we killed an untold number of them. Later on about 10 AM we secured our guns and moved out.

We passed just South of where F Company had the battle with those who got ashore. There were about 75 of them all prettied up in their uniforms. These Japanese were dressed in their best uniforms like going to their funeral. But they got disoriented in the reefs, they were supposed to land further North. Instead they landed right in the midst of the 2nd Battalion which were just taken off the lines for a rest and behind us was the whole 7th Regiment which was in reserve. A carrier pigeon which was found in possession of one of the raiding party was released to carry back a message to enemy headquarters, "We are returning your pigeon, sorry we can't return your demolition people."

So then we moved out going over ridge after ridge. Got to Wana Ridge, Wana Draw & Shuri line, Shuri Castle, Kanishe and all different places down there. Then the rains came. It must have rained for ten days and the mud was unbelievable. The stench and the flies were unreal because there were so many dead Japanese bodies and body parts in the area. We were extremely lucky as we only had about seventeen of our forty-five wounded with one killed. We had one killed and about seventeen wounded. We were blessed that we didn't get more casualties. We continued on, and toward the end, the Japs used to send civilians through to find out where the line was. Then they would infiltrate with them, and so many civilians got killed. It was unbelievable.

Mr. Morris: You hear a lot about the fanaticism.

Mr. Schmittgens: Oh yes, they are just like the terrorists. They were doing it all for the Emperor. It was better to die than surrender. I think there were about a hundred and five thousand Japanese troops killed on Okinawa. More Okinawa conscripts were killed. They were not Japanese, they were of Chinese origin. They had come about a thousand years before that and inhabited the islands.

Mr. Morris: Was the war over at this time?

Mr. Schmittgens: The war ended in August and we were still on Okinawa. We heard that they dropped some kind of bomb, and we didn't know what it was. Nobody knew what it was. But they said there was a lot of devastation. There was a big celebration because the war ended. Everybody started shooting ammunition. The tracers were up there, and that night there were 13 guys who got killed because everything that goes up has to come down.

Mr. Morris: Were they giving you any kind of build up about invading the home island?

Mr. Schmittgens: I didn't know about that until I read a report about twenty five years later, about how they were waiting for us.

Mr. Morris: But they weren't telling you that the next thing they were going to do is invade Japan?

Mr. Schmittgens:

We knew we were getting ready, but we didn't know where we were going. The Division that was on Iwo Jima had regrouped and they were going to land on Kyushu which is the Southern island. Then we were going to land on the Tokyo plains, the 2nd, 1st and 6th Marine Divisions were going to land up there with an Army group. I think they were going to call it the 3rd Army, but I'm not sure. The war ended and I remember seeing a plane flying over with a green cross on it. That was the Japanese Emissary coming to Okinawa to straighten everything out before the final surrender. The surrender was on the Missouri in Tokyo Bay. After that we ran into two typhoons, loaded ships and went to China. Then we went to China to a place called Taku. They put us on a train and went about forty kilometers up to Tientsin on the Hi Ho River. We got there and there must have been a million and half people on the streets waiting for us. They put us in trucks which were run on charcoal. The whole Division was there. We stayed back and loaded our equipment on the trucks that they commandeered. We got on top and we were cheering and the people were all cheering. That old Chinaman took off down the road and the people just pawed at the truck.

They took us to the British barracks at Tientsin and we were there for about a week. Word came out that they wanted everybody over six feet tall in the 2nd Battalion 1st Marines. I was six foot two. They got about a hundred thirty plus for an Honor Guard. We got new uniforms, new leggings, and we looked real nice. We were going to be the Honor Guard for the surrender for the Japanese garrison in North China. So we did a little drill to sharpen us up, and they took us by truck to the area. We got out and lined up, the band was there, and we marched in and looked pretty sharp. We had been practicing for about a week. We marched in and did a left face right in front of this building which was the headquarters of the 3rd Amphibious Corps. There was a big table set up there, and pretty soon the Japs came walking in. They were little farts and then they came in and faced us. They probably said, good God, no wonder we lost. A little bit of psychological warfare.

Mr. Morris:

How many Japs surrendered?

Mr. Schmittgens:

I think the North China garrison was better than one half million men. They had to contain the Chinese while they were up there. Then we had a group of 5th Marines that went up to Peking and on the road, they ran into fire fights which was Chou en lei and Mao and the Communists. The Communists controlled North China. Our job in North China was to repatriate the Japanese and hold the high ground for the Nationalist Chinese. So what we did while we were there, I stood guard with Japanese, and we had to protect the Japanese because the Chinese would have slaughtered them. We rode the coal trains up to the Manchurian border where the Great Wall of China hits the sea. I only went on one patrol and rode the rains up there empty and came back in loaded coal trains. There were a lot of rails that were broken and a lot of shooting still going on. When things like that would happen, they would call for the Marine Air Wing F4Us corrisars to dissipate whatever contingent was giving us a little trouble. The liberty was unbelievable.

Mr. Morris: Everybody loved you?

Mr. Schmittgens: Oh year, but not anymore.

Mr. Morris: Did you take any casualties?

Mr. Schmittgens: After we left there was lot of casualties around Tangku and Taku at the end of the river there. The 5th Regiment was trying to protect ammunition dumps and they tried to hit them. Matter of fact, we got a campaign medal which was considered the China War. We were the 1st in Tientsin and the 6th was down in Singmin tao which was about a couple of hundred miles South. We were holding the high ground until they could get the Nationalists up there, but it didn't work out. It got steadily worse until 1948 when everybody withdrew. I left there in April of '46, came home and went back to work for the railroad. I worked for the railroad for forty-seven years as a train dispatcher, trying to keep the trains going the right way on the right tracks so they won't hit each other.

We were very fortunate. We went through book camp and we went to line camp. We lwearned mortars, some learned machine guns, and we were well trained, and then went overseas and joined the 1st Marine Division after Peleliu and filled out their ranks. We learned a lot before we went to Okinawa. We got there in September, and when they got back from Peleliu we trained together and went into combat in April of '45. We were very fortunate because we learned a lot from being with those guys. I would hate to have been a replacement on the front lines. Some guys had that happen. Like the Battle of the Bulge, you go up there and they don't know who the hell you are. See, We knew all these guys. That aspect is very important and the training we got with these comrades who had experiece from at least two campaigns prior to that was very special. Some of the officers were still Canal veterans because they were career men and all they knew how to do was fight.

We were very fortunate. I would hate to ever be a replacement, because you come up there and they said this is what you are going to do. The guy next to you doesn't know who you are. If they pick somebody to do something, seniority is "you do it".

Mr. Morris: What was your rank?

Mr. Schmittgens: I went in a private and in about eighteen months I became a PFC and shortly after that I became a Corporal. The Marine Corps didn't like to give any ranks because the money came down through the Navy at that time. By the time it got to the Marine Corps, there was just enough money to pay for food. So if you were a Private, you might have been an acting Corporal. If you were a Corporal, you might have been an acting Sergeant. When I left China I was in charge of the ammo section, still a Corporal and I should have been at ;east a Sergeant. But they said if you ship over for six months, we will make you a Sergeant. I said no, I want to go home, so weall went home.

Mr. Morris: It sounds like you were moving around most of the time so you probably didn't get any USO shows, or any entertainment?

Mr. Schmittgens: On Okinawa we saw Kaye Kaiser, and the Seabees had a guy called Ray Anthony. He was a clarinet player and really good. After he got out of the Seabees when the war was over, he went back and he called it the Ray Anthony and the Glenn Miller Orchestra. Tex Beneke played the sax. They played Kalamazoo, Juke Box Saturday Night and all those old tunes. I believe Glenn Miller's wife had control over the orchestra and she had people to run the thing. Ray McKinley was it and different ones. We missed seeing Bob Hope for about two months on Pavuvu. We were still in the States getting ready to come overseas. Bob Hope always spoke about Pavuvu and later on he was still in the Pacific when they told him that these guys were going into combat, so he made sure he did a show for them on Pavuvu before they left. Later on he was up in the Admiralties at Manus Island, and found out that these wounded Marines were the same guys he had entertained on Pavuvu. It really got him upset.

Mr. Morris: Were you ever wounded?

Mr. Schmittgens: No. I had a hot piece of shrapnel laying on the back of my neck. I remember laying there many a time looking at that ground and there was shrapnel all over the place, and I thought how in the hell did anybody live through this mess.

Mr. Morris: How were you supplied?

Mr. Schmittgens: It was an amazing thing that we carried enough mortar ammunition with us when we landed, but the ship that was carrying mortar ammunition was sunk by Kamikazes. We had it dropped by airplane to us with a parachute. Some of the ammunition wasn't even in the cloverleaf, which is three shells in a cardboard container and there was a big rod that is run through it. Some of the lighter ammunition was in a metal box. You screw the top off and you are ready to go. We could always reach back and have plenty of ammunition. The ship was sunk that had all the ammunition and we were getting ammunition that was made in Detroit, Michigan two weeks before. It was flown out to us. Logistics during the war was fantastic. You got to give them a citation that's for sure.

Mr. Morris: What kind of ordinance did you shoot?

Mr. Schmittgens: We fired a mortar. It was 81 mm which is about three inches in diameter. It was phosphorous which is smoke and a light ammo and a heavy ammo. Our mortar platoon fired something like forty-five thousand rounds which was a hell of a lot of ammunition. I'd say that we fired more ammunition than the three previous campaigns. It was spread out over a long distance.

Mr. Mossis: On Okinawa as an example, were they effective in getting down in the caves?

Mr. Schmittgens: No, they weren't. What we would do, we would see a pocket of Japs outside and zoom in on them and fire. They would come out and get their wounded. We had aiming stakes that we shifted our guns over to, and we called the one the undertaker's stake. They would come out to get their wounded and we dropped them. I guess the Geneva Convention wouldn't approve of that.

Mr. Morris: It seems to me you would just shoot them. That's what you are there for and if you don't shoot them they will shoot you.

Obviously you stayed close to the guys in your unit.

Mr. Schmittgens: A few years before my retirement we began to attend the 1st Marine Reunions; and we had what we call mini-reunions with the H-2-1 vets, which was our weapons company. The close bonding done during the war period continues to this day.

Mr. Morris: When you got home when World War II was over, did you communicate right after that?

Mr. Schmittgens: There were two guys, Tom Schicker and Fred Walsh (now deceased) who lived in St. Louis, as I did, and we kept in touch. Sometimes wedding bells would break up the old gang of mine, but we would get together with the old gang. We had families to raise and spent most of our money on that. I had six kids. Most of us had all boys. I had five boys and one girl. I worked for the railroad and I didn't have a social life, because when someone else was home I was working at night. I also corresponded with my Guny Sgt. John Westly Tatum, and finally got to rekindle our friendship in 1986 in Mobile, Alabama at a mini-reunion after we had met some of the Guadalcanal vets at a 1st Marine Reunion in St. Louis (the first one we attended). At this reunion in Mobile was Sid Phillips (it was actually at his home). Sid was a participant in the Ken Burns WWII Documentary along with his sister, Katherine. We also met Eugene Sledge at that time. Sledge was the author of "With the Old Breed on Peleliu & Okinawa".

Mr. Morris: A lot of guys just wanted to forget the war.

Mr. Schmittgens: There were guys like that. My wife wants me to do this thing, but it's not that important to me.

Mr. Morris: How old were you when you went in the service?

Mr. Schmittgens: Eighteen

Mr. Morris: And when you got back you were twenty?

Mr. Schmittgens: Twenty. I worked for the railroad for a year before I joined. I remember when I started out I was a messenger boy. I ran messages from Union Station out to the towers, and I've seen Roosevelt come through, the train was behind the tower in the yards, and I saw one of his dogs. Then, before I joined, I went ~~out~~ to the tower and they

were bringing Italian and German prisoners from North Africa. They were taking them to Southern Missouri, and they also took some to Arizona for prison. It was easier to bring all those prisoners over here than send supplies over there to feed them. The trains used to pull in behind the tower and there were twenty car lengths. It was in the middle of summer and no air conditioning on the train, and the windows would only open about so far as they had blocks on them so they couldn't escape. As soon as the train stopped the guards would get off carrying Thompson sub-machine guns.

Mr. Mossis: Did you become a railroad family?

Mr. Schmittgens: Yes, my father and my grandfather.

Mr. Morris: Before World War II started were the railroads working?

Mr. Schmittgens: My father, grandfather and I worked for the Terminal Railroad in St. Louis. Grandfather retired in 1929, my father in 1968 and my retirement was in 1988. We had 49 years working for the railroad. My grandfather was working for the railroad before they had bridges. They used to ferry the trains across the Mississippi River before they built the Eads Bridge. That was the first bridge across the Mississippi River. Also, my two uncles and one brother worked for the railroad.

Mr. Morris: When the war started where did you get all the trains?

Mr. Schmittgens: Some of the equipment I rode still had oil lamps. Railroads never threw away anything.

Mr. Morris: A lot of guys worked for the telephone and electric company and the company wouldn't let the workers join the military. They got deterrents. Was it like that with the railroads?

Mr. Schmittgens: Yes, I think most of them were just chicken. Some even wrote letters telling how important their jobs were just to get out of it.

Mr. Morris: When you joined was it always the Marines?

Mr. Schmittgens: My father told me to go into the Navy, because in the Navy you sleep between two white sheets. He was in the Navy in World War I, and so he said join the Navy. So I joined the Navy, and I went to the Federal Building. There were about two hundred and sixty men in this big room. A big huge Marine walked in there and he said I need seven volunteers for the Marine Corps. One guy volunteered, I volunteered and the rest of them all hid behind each other. So he went around picking five more. One guy literally cried.

I wasn't supposed to leave until the next day because I was working at Union Station and had asked the Navy SP since I was going into the Navy when would I leave. He said not until the next day. So I went down to join without a shaving kit or anything thinking I was leaving the next day. So when I volunteered for the Marines, they said we are leaving this afternoon. So I called my Mom and Dad to tell them that I was leaving. My mother had a fit. They came down to see me off. My three brothers and five sisters were still in school. My youngest sister was born while I was on Okinawa. Anyway I left that day and came back home two years later.

Mr. Morris: Had you noticed any big change when you came home?

Mr. Schmittgens: My mother had gray hair.

Mr. Morris: Did you have any trouble readjusting?

Mr. Schmittgens: No, I went right back to work. I hardly ever mentioned my service and nobody ever mentioned that I was in the Marine Corps. Two of the guys I worked with, one had been on Iwo Jima, one on Tawara, and me on Okinawa and we never spoke of any of it. Later on the Korean War started and my division was over there again. I didn't go and that sort of brought a lot of stuff back because of the problems they were having.

Mr. Morris: Did you ever think about joining and going back?

Mr. Schmittgens: By that time I was married and had a couple of kids, and I figured my responsibility was at home with them. If they wanted me they would call me.

My wife and I went back for the 50th anniversary of the battle of Okinawa. They had these young Marine guides who would take us all over the island telling us what all happened. They put names on places that we never knew what they were when we fought there. It was an unbelievable experience to see all of it again. They told us about this Peace Park on the Southern end and it had black onyx walls, like the Vietnam Wall, and there was an obelisk in the middle with walks going out like wagon spokes. They aren't straight lines they are zig zags. There are 247,000 names inscribed on them. They included everybody who was killed on Okinawa, including Marines, Soldiers, Sailors, Korean laborers, Japanese, Japanese Kamakazes and Sailors killed at sea. There were about 12,000 to 13,000 ~~American~~ military killed on Okinawa. There were 6700 Marines and Army and the rest were the Navy at sea.

Mr. Morris: Is there anything special you remember about the whole war time experience?

Mr. Schmittgens: I think when we get together we talk about the funny stuff more than anything else. I remember on Pavuvu, we had Indian code talkers. This one guy was Chief Trujillo. We called every one of them Chief. We were all sitting around shooting the breeze, and this one friend was a Jewish fellow and was saying his brother is over in Europe. And I said it's a good thing I'm here because if I was over in Europe I would probably be shooting at one of my relatives because of my German heritage. We knew what the Germans were doing with the Jews prior to the war, but what happened later on, that we didn't know. So we were kidding each other, and the chief was listening to all of this. We used to get ten beer ration and pay ten cents a can, and I didn't drink beer, so I would sell mine for a dollar a can and never had to touch my pay. So one day after the beer issue, here comes the chief up the Company street. He had his Kbar. He wanted to kill the foreigners who took the Indian lands away from them. I guess he had finished his beer ration. So I had to leave pretty quickly. After that everytime he came around, the guys would yell here comes the Chief and I would meet him at the door with two beers.

There were high jinx all the time. It's like a college dorm. No one was over nineteen or twenty years old. If somebody was older than twenty-two or twenty-three we'd call them Pop.

When we landed on Okinawa, getting in those Higgins boats, climbing down the cargo nets, you see the Chaplain giving us absolution or a blessing, you sort of wonder.

Mr. Morris: How do they prepare you for that?

Mr. Schmittgens: They try to make it gung ho, and in it to win. And we did. At least the politicians let us win that war.

Mr. Morris: Thank you so much for sharing your military experience with us. We appreciate your time.