

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR
(Nimitz Museum)

CENTER FOR PACIFIC WAR STUDIES
Fredericksburg, TX 78624

Interview with

ROBERT KOVAR
U. S. MARINES

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

ROBERT KOVAR

Today is September the 4th, 2004. My name is Floyd Cox. I'm a volunteer at the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg, Texas. We're here in the hotel in San Antonio, the Hilton Hotel, to interview Mr. Robert Kovar. We'll just call him Bob during our interview and to start out with Bob I'd like to tell you "thanks" for taking the time to do this. It will mean a lot to future historians in recounting what happened during the forties and early fifties. I'd like to start out with asking you a little bit about your background, where you were born, when you were born, and a little bit about your family?

MR. KOVAR: I was born in Toledo, Ohio, in February, 1928. My father was a railroader, the C & O Railroad, my mother was a housewife. I have one brother who's just a year and a half younger than me.

MR. COX: And did you grow up in the same town?

MR. KOVAR: Oh, yes, I grew up in Toledo and eventually joined the Marine Corps when I was seventeen years old.

MR. COX: What did you do, join right after you graduated from high school?

MR. KOVAR: I didn't graduate.

MR. COX: You decided you'd join. Did you have a time talking your folks into signing for you?

MR. KOVAR: I had a time with my mother. My father was quite willing and so it went.

MR. COX: As you all were teenage boys, right. Well, when was that? Was the recruiting station right there in Toledo?

MR. KOVAR: Yes, it was. I enlisted at the end of the school year about April or May but was not called to go until the first of September. I went on active duty the first of September.

MR. COX: What year?

MR. KOVAR: 1945.

MR. COX: Did you take a troop train to your boot camp?

MR. KOVAR: No, there were eight of us. We went from Toledo to Cleveland to be examined and sworn in and then we went by train down through Washington, D. C. and on down to Paris Island.

MR. COX: That was quite an awakening when you got to Paris Island, wasn't it

MR. KOVAR: For a seventeen year old, you bet!

MR. COX: How long were you in basic training?

MR. KOVAR: From September until just after Thanksgiving and I went to Camp LeJuene, North Carolina, and was given a ten-day leave and came back to Camp LeJuene and immediately joined a replacement draft and was sent out to California. We traveled to California by the classic troop train, took us five or six days. I wrote about it and I still have the letter in my notes that I took. We made the trip and got to California and almost immediately went aboard a troop ship and sailed. We thought we were going to China and we ended up that's where we went. The trip across the ocean took about thirty days and then we finally landed. First we landed in St. Tau and then we left a few people off there and the bulk of us went up to Tacobar(sp?) which is the port of Changen.

MR. COX: Let me ask you, Bob, two things. Number one did you specialize in any particular weapon when you were going through your camp, were you a mortar man?

MR. KOVAR: No. In boot camp we fired the carbine and the BAR and the pistol and of course the major weapon was the M-1 rifle and no experience with the ??? weapons, stuff like that.

MR. COX: And then, when they finally put you on a ship to go to China, do you remember the name of the ship?

MR. KOVAR: Yes, it was the PRESIDENT ADAMS.

MR. COX: What year was that when you arrived in China?

MR. KOVAR: February of 1946. We left in January and arrived in February.

MR. COX: What was your first impression when you got to China?

MR. KOVAR: Curious thing about it was that I celebrated my eighteenth birthday in China. I had been exposed to all of the movies of daring Deu of China all through the thirties and forties and I felt finally it's my turn.

MR. COX: You were in the 1st Marines?

MR. KOVAR: 1st Marine Division.

MR. COX: 1ST Marine Division. What company were you in?

MR. KOVAR: I was assigned to the 1st Engineer Battalion. I was assigned to Charlie Company 1st Engineers, these were so-called combat engineers. I was immediately sent way up north to an area called Peitaiho. The 7th Marine Regiment was up there and my engineer company was in support of the 7th Marines. We provided all the engineer duties for the next year whether it was building something or blowing something up or making a road, building a bridge, whatever we were required for the first year.

MR. COX: This construction was that for the marines or was that for the nationalist Chinese?

MR. KOVAR: That was for the marines to support the infrastructure that we needed. Of course, the roads and the bridges that we built were also utilized by the Chinese. We did not build them for the nationalist army or the communist army. We did what we needed and we did that and we kept the trains running.

MR. COX: That was one of my next questions, were you at any time on the job or whatever it might have been, did you ever come under fire either from the nationalists or the communists or both?

MR. KOVAR: The answer to the first part, yes, we came under fire don't have any idea who was shooting at us. We assumed that it was the communist forces but there were times when I think the nationalists' forces shot at us, too, but I don't know that. That's just an assumption. I did not come under a great deal of fire like some people did, but on the tracks on the railroad run from Chung Gin to Chin Wan Ta which is about eighty miles, maybe more than that, maybe one hundred and twenty-five miles. There were several key points that were manned by marine units to provide security at bridges and overpasses and along the site so that the enemy, whoever the enemy was, couldn't blow up the tracks, which was their big ambition. It was necessary to keep the trains running in order to provide a way to transport coal from the mines in north China down to the city to provide for both industry and just plain heat for the people. The goal of the 1st Division was to transport one hundred thousand tons of coal every month and we made that. As long as we were on the track duty from the first of 1946 until we finally moved

out in January, 1947, we maintained that goal, one hundred thousand tons of coal a month.

MR. COX: Well, that's a lot of coal, isn't it? Now to resume our tape, we were talking about what you were doing in China and that was helping maintain the railroads to ship coal and I imagine other supplies. Was this in support of the nationalist Chinese? Do you think that's the reason you guys were there?

MR. KOVAR: The official line is that we were supposed to stand neutral between both factions, the nationalists and the communists. At the time we were there, generally the nationalists had control of the area that we were in but they were in constant combat and battle with the communists which over a period of time the nationalists kept losing. The time we're talking about 1945 and 46, the nationalists had control of the area we were in and so to keep the trains running and to keep the coal flowing was in support of civilian population for power for the city and heat for the homes. We were not necessarily supporting the nationalists' forces but were supporting the civilian population under their control. As the communists took over, they just took over and one day this section would be so-called nationalists' area and the communists would come in and take over the village or province and then it would be communists. It didn't affect us except for individual combat situations that are pretty much documented. They didn't bother the Marines. They shot at us sometimes but with no concerted effort to get a guy, at least that's how I felt.

MR. COX: Do you know of any casualties that you had in the 1st. Marines?

MR. KOVAR: Oh, yes.

MR. COX: People don't hear about this.

MR. KOVAR: At Anping(?) and at Sin Ho(?) two places where there was a pitched battle. We suffered a total of thirteen dead and in excess of thirty wounded. That was two incidences where they attempted to take command of our ammunition depots. They didn't but they tried. Those two specific actions, Anping and Sin Ho, were where they made a concerted effort and really attacked the marines. Of course, they were driven away.

MR. COX: Now you mention another part of your job while you were there was to disarm, if you will, the Japanese occupational force that was there.

MR. KOVAR: We landed and we had to accept the surrender of the members of the Japanese Quandung Army and it was estimated to be as many as nearly a million.

Apparently it was around six hundred thousand. Of them there was a significant number of civilians. They had a full infrastructure supporting their army out there. They had been there since 1932, 1933. Of course, after ten years, you can imagine what the ??? was doing. They had to surrender to us, they had to surrender their arms and then we had to gather them up and ship them back to Japan, big LSTs full of them making the trip across the Yellow Sea over to Japan. We did that from the end of '45 to about March or April of 1946. Finally they were all gone.

MR. COX: And then you concentrated primarily on the railroad, protecting the railroad.

MR. KOVAR: That duty was from the northern part of Chin Wan Tau(sp?) down to Ginsen (sp?) and over to Beijing. We had a major force in Beijing, a major force in TanGin and they said the 7th Marines were up north in Pederhole(sp?) but bit by bit we retrench and come back together until finally in June of 1947 the 1st Marine Division

went home. By that time we had pulled out of Beijing, pulled out of ChanGin, and we concentrated the marine forces down in Sing Tau on the ??? Peninsula.

MR. COX: Was it pretty quiet down there before you guys moved out and weren't attacked by the Chinese?

MR. KOVAR: No

MR. COX: And once you left China you stayed in the Marines for twenty-eight years. As you were telling me, you went to Korea and how long did you spend in Korea?

MR. KOVAR: Thirteen months.

MR. COX: At this time your rank was?

MR. KOVAR: Sergeant.

MR. COX: You were still in engineering?

MR. KOVAR: Yes.

MR. COX: As I mentioned to you I was wondering which was the coldest China or Korea?

MR. KOVAR: Cold is cold. They're in the same geographic area. They were both in the same latitude line, I'd say, and just bitter cold.

MR. COX: And once you came back from Korea, by the way, I was on the Greenland ice cap when that armistice was called over there, where did you go?

MR. KOVAR: I had duty in Washington, D.C. at the marine barracks, H&I, which is the big show display to all special guards and I used to guard the president under Camp David and did that for a little over two years.

MR. COX: How did you like that duty?

MR. KOVAR: Oh, that was nice! My wife didn't like it because every time we'd have a long weekend I had to go to Camp David and command the Marine guard and she had to wait back. They'd give me compensatory time off but it didn't make any difference.

When they had parties and stuff on holidays I couldn't go and my wife couldn't go.

MR. COX: After you served that kind of duty and I guess just miscellaneous things until Viet Nam started and then you went into Viet Nam and once again you were still with the 1st Marines?

MR. KOVAR: Yes, my first tour out there in 1965 was in the 1st Marine Division and then next time I went out in 1968 it was still in the 1st Division but I was with the 26th Marines.

MR. COX: Were you in a rifle company both times?

MR. KOVAR: First time I was in engineer support. Second time I was in a rifle company.

MR. COX: Did you get into the rifle company at your request or at the Marines request?

MR. KOVAR: Just the luck of the draw. I enjoyed being with those men. It was a good company and it was alright.

MR. COX: A lot was written about things that went on with the troops in Viet Nam, drugs, etc. Did the Marines have any problems or was it a big problem in the Marines?

MR. KOVAR: I think there probably was some problem. There was not in my unit. We didn't have any demonstrations. I don't doubt that some of them found a stash of marijuana someplace but it was not particularly noticeable and no troubles came out of it. We were a fairly disciplined organization.

MR. COX: That's what I was thinking. I was going to ask you do you think it was because of the Marine discipline that is instilled from the day you walk in?

MR. KOVAR: I'm sure. Those were troubled times, you know, in the late '60's nationwide and some of it spilled over into the military. I understand, but I don't know, that the army had significant problems out there. There may have been marine units that did but I didn't know about it because I was in a very strong regiment and we were alright.

MR. COX: As I said, you didn't read anything in the paper about the marines, mostly it was the army but as you marines think you're one notch above. I'm not saying that's not true, I'm just saying that's what you guys, at least everyone I've talked to thinks so.

Well, you served two tours. Did you ask for the second?

MR. KOVAR: No, but I knew it was coming and I had been promoted to 1st Sgt. in my first tour, no I just went when they sent for me.

MR. COX: They had a slot where you fit.

MR. KOVAR: Well, I was getting to the point where I could retire but I didn't and once they say you're going, you have to go. So that's how I ended up with two tours, and most marines did two tours. If they went out in '65, they went out again in '68 or '69.

MR. COX: I wasn't aware of that. After you got back from your second tour, did you retire right away?

MR. KOVAR: No, I went to Marine Corps Air Station in New River, North Carolina, and I was Sgt. Major of a squadron. I stayed there for just about three years and then I retired.

MR. COX: Have you stayed retired or did you take a job after?

MR. KOVAR: Oh, yes, I went to school for a year, got my degree and then I got a job as a personnel manager for the defense department and worked there for twelve years and then I retired. I've been fully retired since 1990.

MR. COX: Good, good. Is there anything that I haven't asked you about your duty in China or Korea or Viet Nam that you would like to add? This will be in our archives forever.

MR. KOVAR: I can't think of anything. All of us tend to think we just did routine duties and sometimes when we're asked about something it can draw something out but basically I feel like most marines feel it's just some kind of day to day duty and a few highs and a few lows and a lot of in between.

MR. COX: Well, I want to tell you "Thank you very much, Bob, for your service to our country." As an American citizen, I'm proud of you guys.

MR. KOVAR: Well, I hope this goes well for your archive section.

MR. COX: I'm sure it will.

Transcribed August 3, 2009, by Eunice Gary.