

National Museum of the Pacific War

Center for Pacific War Studies
Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with
Dr. Buckner Fanning
6th Marines 2nd Division
Nagasaki Japan

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Dr. Buckner Fanning

Mr. Cox: Today is January 18, 2005. My name is Floyd Cox and I am a volunteer at the National Museum of the Pacific War. We are here at the Mission Springs School in San Antonio, Texas to interview Dr. Buckner Fanning concerning his experiences during World War II. Buckner, I want to take this opportunity to tell you thank you very much for taking the time to do this with us.

Dr. Fanning: It is my privilege. I'm honored to do it.

Mr. Cox: I would like to start by asking you, when and where were you born and where did you go to school?

Dr. Fanning: I was born in Houston in 1926. My folks moved to Dallas when I was about two years old. That was their home. My father had grown up in Greenville, Texas, which is about fifty miles from Dallas on a farm. He went into the army during World War I and served in France. My mother was born in Dallas and went to Baylor University. When my dad came back from overseas and got out of the military he went to a Junior College in Greenville and then went to Waco where he met my mother and later married her.

I attended Woodrow Wilson High School in Dallas. My father was a

business man involved in the insurance and various things. My mother was a remarkable woman. She was a bible teacher, book reviewer, painter and musician. She was one of those multi-talented people and a very devoted Christian. All of us were very active at the First Baptist Church in Dallas, which is where I became a Christian at about ten years of age. On December 7, 1941 I was a junior in high school. We went to church that Sunday morning and then went to the home of some friends of my mother's, Mr. And Mrs. Ben Ball, who was a banker in Dallas. My brother, who is five years younger, and I were out in the back yard throwing the football around before lunch. My mother came to the back door and said, "Boys, you better come in, there is something interesting on the radio. You ought to come in and listen." The New reporter was saying something about Pearl Harbor and we had never heard of that place. I can remember to this day where I was sitting on the floor leaning up against the wall listening to the attack on Pearl Harbor December 7th. Suddenly everything changed. Everyone's mind changed. I went to school the next morning, I could go to the very seat at the very spot where I sat, even now. We listened to President Roosevelt speaking to congress and war was declared . Some of my friends, who were about a year older than me just got up and walked out of the class room. They went down and signed up. Some of them didn't come back alive. Some of them who were good friends of mine didn't come back. On my birthday March 13, 1942 my dad went with me to the Marine Corps Recruiting Office and I enlisted in

the Marine Corps. They let me finish high school and then I went off to the Marine Corps. They sent us to school because most of us were just out of high school. We were taught some math, history and that sort of thing. Then I went to Boot Camp at Paris Island.

Mr. Cox: Going from Dallas, Texas to Boot Camp at Paris Island did you find life a little different?

Dr. Fanning: Well, I had gotten a little conditioning the summer before. My dad got me a job as a water boy in Waco, Texas. They were building an airplane hanger down there at a small airfield that they were using for training the military. I was only sixteen and they paid me fifty cents an hour and overtime. We worked ten hours a day seven days a week, it was terrible. Working with these guys, that we called “hanging steel” were all from Sweden and Norway. These guys were tough as nails and they gave me a hard time. I was the water boy so I had to give them water. Waco in the summer it was hot as blazes. Physically it really helped me so when I joined the Marine Corps next summer I was a little acclimated to being around different people, attention, cussing each other and all the stuff that goes on.

I was seventeen years old when I went to Paris Island. I’ll tell you what, the Marine Corp changed my life. I have now been a preacher for fifty-five years. I was a pastor at Trinity Baptist Church for forty-two years, which was a large church with a lot of ministries. I don’t question God’s

providence or how he leads us but I think that the Marine Corps had a lot to do with what God did to change me life. I began to understand more about myself and other people. I was more understanding, had a bigger view and a sense of commitment. Semper Fidelis, you are committed to one another and to me that is the basic of Christianity. Jesus said, "What is required of you but that you be found faithful." That is a big thing in my life, not only as a Christian but it was fortified and intensified because of the Marine Corps.

I still shine me own shoes. (Laughter) I really do.

I didn't grow up in a hunting family. I fired a little old single action twenty-two a few times. They taught me at Paris Island how to fire a gun and I qualified higher than anyone in our platoon. Later on after the war was over and we were in Japan I was chosen to be one of fifteen to represent the Marine Corp in a national firing competition. They flew us to Hawaii and we competed there. It was a great experience. They taught me how to fire a rifle and that event was sort of like a little dessert after the war.

We went on into Camp Lejune for basic training. We were slated to go on to Quantico to be commissioned. We were eager to get in there. Three other guys and I, all of them very successful now, we were impatient. We said, "We want to get in this war before it's over." The Marine Corp thought we were crazy, they really did. One of the guys, Garland Dewey French is very successful in his business up in Cincinnati, Ohio. Al

Dalton, who is a native of San Antonio, went into the Department of Public Safety when he got out of the military. He was a highway patrolman and got promoted. He was selected by the Exxon Company and moved to Houston and was in charge of security there. Leo Gosset, we called him ___? was head of the Department of Public Safety. He was the Colonel for DPS. All of us went to college and all of us turned out to be doing good things. All of them devoted and active Christians in their churches.

Mr. Cox: You met all of these fellows in basic training?

Dr. Fanning: Yes, I didn't know any of them before. We went in there and said, "We don't want to go to Quantico and they thought we were nuts. Then they took us in one by one. I think they thought these guys just had too much beer or something. I told them that I loved the Marine Corp and I didn't want to change anything I just didn't want to go through all of those things. "This war may end without us being able to win it." (Laughter) So they said, "Okay, you're gone." They put us on a train and we went for seven days on that train out to San Diego. We went to Camp Pendleton. We were assigned to the 6th Regiment of the 2nd Division of the Marine Corp. I forget my phone number but I can still remember my serial number. It was 541873. It's not tattooed on my arm but it is on my mind. (Laughter)

We went to Guam and it was partially secured.

Mr. Cox: What year was it when you went to California and how long did stay there before being shipped out?

Dr. Fanning: Oh I kind of lose track of that. I think we were there for about two or three months. What they were training us for was occupying Japan. When we got to Guam and it was semi secured. I never got into a situation where I shot anyone. I was ready to do it. I was trained to do it. I was a PFC in a Rifle Company. I was dedicated. I was ready to go and I wanted to go. I don't know but I guess God protected me from not only being shot but I didn't kill anybody. I feel for men who have done that and I have counseled with a lot of men who have done that. I believe that in war time that is not only permissible but it is the thing to do. I would have done it. To protect my family and to protect what we believe in. I would do that for my sons and daughter right now. I might be willing to sacrifice myself but I'm not going to sacrifice if I can't save somebody else.

Then we went to Saipan. We were really kind of in reserve for Okinawa. In Saipan they trained us to go into Japan. We had to work through those mountains and how to get into the caves and all of that sort of thing. We practiced the landings and the whole bit. Then we get the word that they had dropped this super bomb. We didn't know what it was. I didn't know what it was. I had had chemistry class in high school and knew what an atom was but I had never heard of an atomic bomb, nuclear fallout or

radiation. For all of us our language was completely changes after that. We were on board ship and as soon as that peace treaty was signed we were waiting outside the harbor at Nagasaki.

Mr. Cox: When you heard this bomb was dropped and the devastation it caused, what were your feelings? Were you glad?

Dr. Fanning: Well yes, we were kind of puzzled. It was August 7th when it was dropped on Hiroshima and two days later August 9, 1945 it was dropped on Nagasaki. We heard about the big bomb and it was supposed to be a super bomb but they didn't say anything about ending the war yet. We just thought well great and then the second bomb was dropped and that was when we were hearing all the scuttlebutt. We didn't know what it was and the Japanese had not yet surrendered. There was to be total surrender, there wasn't to be any negotiations.

I admire Harry Truman to this day for doing that. He was the first president I voted for because in those days you couldn't vote until you were twenty-one. Harry Truman is one of my heroes. Not just because of that but because of many things that he did. I have great admiration for him.

The war was over and we were shooting off tracers and everything. It's a miracle that we didn't shoot each other.

Lo and behold the peace treaty is signed. We landed in Nagasaki and we expected resistance because we knew the Kamikaze mentality. If they

were coming to Dallas, I would be out there fighting so I thought they would be out there fighting too. But there was nothing, we didn't even see anybody for a day or two. They were just totally devastated. Not only physically but stunned emotionally.

To this day I can smell Nagasaki. One hundred twenty thousand people killed instantly. We saw people with burns all the time. It really began to eat on me. The thing that really began to get under my skin, literally, we didn't see any men. All the men that were at least fifteen or sixteen years of age were off in the Japanese military. Everyone that we saw, were women, children and the elderly. They were just in total dismay. They probably knew less about that Atomic Bomb than my daughter knew about Viet Nam when she was five years old. She would see it on television and it wouldn't register with her.

We started giving food and clothing to them. We had kids coming up and scrounging for food out of the trash cans where we were. We were living in a Mitsubishi warehouse that wasn't completely destroyed. It had no roof on it and it would rain on us. We would have to put those ponchos over us and tie our shoes on our cot so they would be dry when we put them on in the morning. You know, all the stuff you go through in times like that.

Mr. Cox: What was your job there in Nagasaki?

Dr. Fanning: Our job there was to go two by two all over the place. We went to where

they were building ships. We crawled in some of those two and one men submarines that were being built there in Nagasaki. They built battleships there. That was a big port. We went two by two all around looking for anybody that . . . we had a few incidents but nothing really bad.

Mr. Cox: Was it your job to collect any arms that you came across?

Dr. Fanning: Oh yes. A lot of guys brought some home as souvenirs.

When we went through these caves, I'll tell you we would have had one heck of a fight because they had ammunition galore in there. Like Iwo Jima and Mount Suribachi; it was one cave right after another. Japan is so hilly and they had caves all back through there. I think even the Japanese and the Americans now agree if we blended and fought traditionally we would have lost a half million men and they would have lost a half million men.

Mr. Cox: I have read that it is estimated that Japan would have lost at least two Million people.

Dr. Fanning: I believe that we could have lost half as many. I was kind of disappointed but grateful in a way. I had ambivalent feelings. I don't know to this day how I found out, I guess it was when we were doing patrolling around Nagasaki, when I saw a little sign that happened to be in English that indicated that a little building was a Methodist church. My mother had given me a bible when I left home and I stuck it in the bottom of my sea

bag. I hadn't had it out for over two years. This whole thing began to work on my mind and my spirit. I hadn't been to church or chapel. I looked on God as sort of a fire escape. I felt like I was a gung ho Marine and I could take care of myself but if I got in a real tight spot, God would bail me out. I thought if I can't handle it then God you do it. I began to have a feeling of something inside. I've never had a feeling of any voice or flashing lights. I don't question people who do but I began to think I need some spiritual renewal. I went back the next Sunday and went to that little Japanese church. They were surprised to see a Marine in uniform come in carrying a rifle. I just sat on the back row and they were very gracious to me. They welcomed me, bowing and everything. I couldn't understand a word of the sermon or any of the hymns. I just sat there with my little bible. I just opened it up and I didn't know straight up from sideways about it but I would just read it. They only had forty or fifty people, a very small congregation. I would help the pastor pick up the hymnals and the chairs and then we would bow to one another. I would say _____? Thank you very, very much. I would go back the next Sunday. God was really working in my life.

Then I was chosen to represent the 2nd Marine Division in the firing competition in Hawaii. We got on a C-47 at ____? Which is near Nagasaki. We flew from there to Iwo. One of the guys on our rifle team had been on Iwo Jima His name was Smitty from Tennessee. He and I stole a jeep and went all over Iwo. He wasn't really talking to me but he was just

reminiscing where he had been and where his friend had gotten killed. He was wounded there. We drove up on the top of Mount Suribachi. I stood up there on top of Mount Suribachi and looked at the beach and thought there is now way in the world anybody could have lived through that. We got back on the C-47 and went to Marcus island, which is not much bigger than this room. We even had trouble landing there because it is so small. From there we went to Wake Island then to Midway and then to Honolulu.

Mr. Cox: What was your rank at that time?

Dr. Fanning: I was a PFC. I joke when I talk to some of my officers at Trinity Church. That was what I was. They made me a Corporal when I was discharged. I was glad I was an enlisted man. I really was. I think it gave me an identification with the enlisted men. Had I been an officer I might had a different feeling. That is why I love San Antonio because it is a military town. I've spoken a lot of times to all kinds of military organizations and I always tell them, "If you were in the service during World War II, you'll understand this. I was a PFC in the Rifle Company 6th Regiment 2nd Division, but in defense of my military career I want you to know I made PFC three different times." (Laughter)

Mr. Cox: Tell me how that happened.

Dr. Fanning: I had a run in every now and then with the top Sergeant. Nothing really

serious. I didn't end up in the brig or anything like that. The war was over and all of us were kind of footloose and fancy free. It wasn't really that bad.

Mr. Cox: How did your rifle team do in the competition?

Dr. Fanning: Oh, we did well. I think we as a team came in second. One of the men on our team was a Major or Lt. Colonel who fired the forty-five. We would watch him hold that forty-five out there at arms length and fire for long periods of time, which is very hard to do because it is very heavy weapon. His right arm was about twice the size of his left arm. He could handle that thing and hold it up there. We would try and stay up with him but we couldn't do it. He would stay forever and sweat and quiver. He later became the pistol director of pistol training for the FBI. He did well. We would just go out and watch him fire that forty-five. They then moved us to P____? Japan, which had not been bombed at all. It is called the Athens of Japan, at least it was then. There was a university there but there weren't any military installations so it was good duty. We began to get some fresh food.

Mr. Cox: What was your job while you were there?

Dr. Fanning: It was guard duty and I was in charge of the headquarters building. It was a three story building. I had an injury on my left elbow so they put me down there and made me a police sergeant in that headquarters. So I would meet with about fifty Japanese workers every morning and I'll tell

you what, they are hard workers and they are clean. If you would tell them to do something they would do it. They would have lunch. They would bring their fish, rice or whatever and then they would go back to work. I would pay them at the end of the day and go back through the building to be sure all the lights were on and all the toilet paper was there. They cleaned up the place like crazy so I had really good duty there for a while.

Then they shipped us to Sasebo and then shipped us home. It took us twenty-one days to get home to San Diego and then we were discharged. I came home and God was really working in my life. I wanted to be a lawyer and go into politics. That had been my dream. I came home and I was really dealing with what am I going to, what am I supposed to do.

The war had something to do with it. I had a compassion for those people even though I hated them. People talk about hatred and being vindictive and I was. A lot of those people were as innocent as my little brother was innocent. I believe a war, like Jimmy Carter said, "War is evil even when it is an essential war it is still evil because people are hurt." I began dealing with that and praying about that.

They were having a big youth meeting in Dallas. Young men were preaching, most of them coming out of the service, they were telling their stories. Some of them were not in the military but were younger and were preaching. I had the deep feeling that I was suppose to do some kind of ministry in Christian ministry.

I went to Baylor in 1946. There were real fine Christians there and they started asking me to tell me story about being in Nagasaki. Nobody knew much about it and it was indescribable. I have pictures of it but it is unbelievable how horrible it was. They started asking me to go to these little churches in central Texas and tell about it. They would ask me to preach at their churches. I would say, "I don't know how to preach." I got books and talked to some older guys and started trying to figure it out. Now when I say this you are going to laugh. In Waco in those days they had a State Venereal Disease Clinic because penicillin had just come out. Gonorrhea and syphilis were being treated with it. They had these two state facilities in Waco for treatment. Of course they were segregated, the blacks in one place and the whites in another place. They wanted to have worship services and they asked if anyone wanted to come and preach. I said, "Man, I do. That's what I want to do." It's hard for me to say but I believe that is what God wanted me to do. So I would go out there on Sunday afternoon and I can't call it preaching but I would do the best I'd do the best thing I could do. I'd preach to the blacks and I would preach to the whites. Frankly I'd rather preach to the blacks than the whites because the blacks will help you preach. (Laughter) They'll help you. "Come on young man get up!"

Then I started getting invitations to the churches and out of that I started preaching. I went to Baylor and was in the seminary. I had an evangelistic ministry for ten years where I was preaching in football

stadiums, individual churches and big churches. I preached to crowds of twenty-five thousand people at times. For two weeks in revivals.

Twenty-five thousand people in Miami and Augusta, Georgia. For three weeks in Newport News, Virginia in a football stadium, twelve and fifteen thousand people every night. I was doing that all over the country.

Then I came to Trinity Baptist Church. I preached in San Antonio at the First Baptist Church and Trinity was without a pastor and they called me to be their pastor. I never thought about being a pastor, I thought I was an evangelist. It was in 1959 that I came to Trinity Baptist Church.

Billy Graham and I have been friends since 1949. I worked with him in New York and Atlanta. I invited him to come to San Antonio and he came in 1968 for the Hemisphere Crusade. I invited him to come again in 1998 to the Alamo Dome. Billy is a great guy and a dear friend. We played golf together when he was here preaching.

I always thought I would be an evangelist but I stayed here in San Antonio at Trinity Baptist Church and the thing that I liked and this is what Billy and I talked about. He said, "Buckner, what do you miss?" I said, "I miss being in big meetings and preaching. I've preached in tents and outdoors but I miss preaching in churches." And he said, "You know what I miss? I miss doing what you are doing. I miss being there and not only seeing a lot of people making decisions for Christ but seeing them change and being a part of it". I missed doing funerals and weddings. I did a funeral yesterday. I've done nearly eight or nine hundred weddings and well over

five hundred funerals.

I came to love being a pastor and that relationship so that is what I've done and now I'm retired but I'm still preaching nearly every Sunday. I preach at First Baptist Church of Corpus Christi next Sunday. We started this Inter-denominational Christian school where we are sitting now. We have Pre K to eighth grade and it is flourishing and thank God for that.

The clincher for me was that I was invited back by the pastors of Nagasaki, Japan to go and preach there on the 30th anniversary of the dropping of the Atomic Bomb. I went and took twenty-five people from my church with me. We went over there and the mayor welcomed us and it was big news that a former Marine who had landed in Nagasaki after the war and he has come back to preach. The press gave me hell for a while, they really did. They said, "Why are you doing this? Are you coming here because we bombed Pearl Harbor?" I said, "No, that is not the reason at all. I'm here to tell you and I want everybody to know that if we allow Jesus in our hearts, we will not be killing one another. I'm grateful that I did not have to kill any Japanese soldier. I would have, just like they would have killed me. I'm not here for politics. I'm here to just say I want the world to have peace."

They made a movie in Japan about our being there called "Nagasaki, One man's Return" and it was shown nationwide on NBC. It received the gold medal for outstanding religious program in 1976. We got the gold medal at the New York Film Festival. That is when we were interviewed on the

Today Show with Ed _____

Later, the mayor came over here with twenty-five Japanese. We had been over there as their guest for the 30th anniversary so we brought them here. We made them honorary members of San Antonio and got them cowboy hats and boots. We took them up to Lyndon Johnson's facility and the Capitol in Austin. The mayor welcomed them as a "Sister City".

I love the Japanese. It changed my life. I hated them and I wanted to win that war and we did, but you know I've come to the place now, if we have to go to war to defend our country, I'd do it again. I'll be seventy-nine years old next month but I would do what I could do. I am really committed to helping the world move in such a way that we don't have to do that.

I thank God for the Marine Corps and I admire every man and woman who serve their country. There were some Quaker ministers in the Marine Corp who would not carry a gun but they served as corpsmen and chaplains. One of the men who raised the flag on Iwo Jima was a corpsman. I read his son's book, *Flags of our Fathers*, one of the most moving books I've ever read.

Mr. Cox: The man that wrote that book will be there at the Iwo Jima reenactment.

Dr. Fanning: Oh man, I've got to be there. I landed there but not during combat. That is a hero place for me and all Marines. I'm going to go up there even if I have to hitchhike. (Laughter)

Thank God for letting me tell my story. God changed my life. World War II was a terrible thing but you know God can make good things come out of bad things.

The horrible Tsunami that happened in Southeast Asia was a terrible thing. Our little school here has already raised thirty-two thousand dollars to help the children in Southeast Asia.

I'm going to spend the rest of my life working with these kids, preaching and doing revivals. I was invited to the Pentagon to preach on the Thanksgiving day service many years ago. They have that service in that big area there. This was during Presidents Nixon's years. I think the Chief of Staff then was _____. I had lunch with the Chief of Staff of the Army in his lunch room. I had workshop with the Chaplains in Washington. I have had a lot of involvement with the military in San Antonio and always will because I have a camaraderie with them.

Mr. Cox: There is no such thing as an ex Marine.

Dr. Fanning: That's right. I go to the Marine birthday event every year. I wouldn't miss it. I'll be there again in November when we do it again.

Mr. Cox: Thank you for your time Buckner. I want to shake your hand and tell you thank you very much for your service to our country.

Dr. Fanning: The country served me more than I served it. I've been blessed by what it means to be an American. God bless you.

Transcribed by:
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